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Staging the Asian American in Hong Kong: Examining Transcultural Performances of Asian American Identity in Hong Kong English Language Amateur Theatre Productions of "Thoroughly Modern Millie" and "Yellow Face"

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Staging the Asian American in Hong Kong:
Examining Transcultural Performances of Asian American Identity in
Hong Kong English Language Amateur Theatre Productions of
Thoroughly Modern Millie and *Yellow Face*.

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Master of Arts

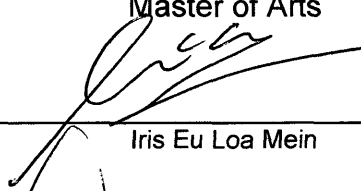
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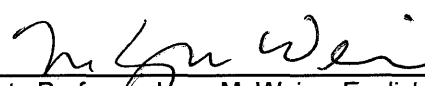


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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the transnational stage in Hong Kong as a place for the performance of Asian American identity. I look at two American shows, the stage musical *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and the play *Yellow Face*, and their recent stagings in Hong Kong by English language amateur theatre groups. Both shows share common themes of Asian American identity and representation, specifically the performativity of Asianness through the use of yellowface.

This thesis is part literary analysis and part ethnography. An examination of the literary themes shows how Asian stereotypes in American culture persist and resist eradication, despite attempts by the authors to reinvent the act of yellowface. I situate these two shows in the sociocultural and historical context of postcolonial Hong Kong. The racial tensions in Hong Kong during the 1960s between the Hong Kong Chinese population and the British colonials were indicative of a long-standing power imbalance between white/dominant and other/abjected. This imbalance also manifested in the inaccessibility of English language education, theatre and art for the local population. By presenting this aspect of Hong Kong civil rights history, I posit that the separate civil rights movements in Hong Kong and the United States created similar sociocultural situations in which minority groups continue the struggle to define their identities. Interviews conducted with three American participants in the Hong Kong productions of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face*—two of which are Asian American—highlight the actors' and director's thoughts on performing American theatre outside of the United States, and how the transcultural turn assisted their performance of racial identity.

These performances in Hong Kong of Asian Americanness allow a re-examination of Asian American identity—traditionally set within the white/majority-other/minority dyad of the American racial landscape—by shifting the focus away from the Asian-as-a-minority dynamic, whilst still remaining relevant to the discussion about the performance of identity and the Asian American experience.

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For Quila

Introduction

This thesis examines the recent stagings in Hong Kong of two American shows that share themes of Asian American identity and the performance of racial stereotype. Through the examination of the literary representation and dramatic performance of Asian Americanness in both shows, I posit that performances of race and yellowfacing at a transcultural scale can be used as a tool for the exploration of Asian American identity, rather than only being signifiers of exclusion and examples of ridicule.

To illustrate this, I will examine the Hong Kong stage productions of the revived-for-stage musical *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and *Yellow Face*, a play written by Asian American playwright David Henry Hwang. I will also consider the experiences of two of the lead performers, and a director in these productions. My study is part literary analysis and part ethnography, situated within the socio-historical context of postcolonial and transcultural Hong Kong. I use literary criticism and performance theory to discuss the ways in which the two key characters—Mrs. Meers in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and Marcus Gee in *Yellow Face*, both white characters who are racially fluid—are able to pass as believable Asians to the other characters on stage. Mrs. Meers and Marcus Gee represent the two extremes of yellowfacing on stage, that of extremely ridiculous, dated, over-the-top yellowfacing and minstrelsy, and the straight-faced, serious character whose imitation of the perfect Asian American outshines the real (and flawed) Asian characters. This racial fluidity is not just cosmetic, but is integral to the progression of the plots of both shows and to the character development of Mrs. Meers and Marcus Gee. Their racial ambiguity remains largely unnoticed or unquestioned by the other characters. The denouement of both plots is brought about by the shedding of the yellow face as

performed by the white character. The presence of actual Asian characters in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face* complicate the white yellowfacing by presenting an alternative version of the Asian, one that is promoted as the authentic version, but when scrutinised is just as purposefully constructed and no less problematic.

The ethnographic part of my thesis consists of my interviews with the actors who played Mrs. Meers and Marcus Gee, and the director of the Hong Kong production of *Yellow Face*. All three interviewees are white American and/or Asian American, who had already migrated to Hong Kong before eventually participating in their respective shows. They had thus already experienced life as expatriates in Hong Kong and developed some reflective understanding of race and identity in both the United States and in Hong Kong, before their participation in the shows. In my interviews with them, I asked them about their theatre experiences in general, the challenges they faced in the roles that they played in the Hong Kong shows, and the ways in which their experiences with racism and their thoughts about identity affect how they perform and the artistic choices they make. The parallels between the life experiences of the performers and the roles that they performed seemed at times overwhelming. All three subjects stated that being in Hong Kong allowed them a chance to perform in roles that would have otherwise been unlikely in the United States, which I believe further highlights the importance of examining instances of performance of American texts on a transcultural scale.

The purpose of my study is to examine whether a transcultural atmosphere affects the way in which yellowfacing is conceived and perceived, and if so, how. In order to do this, I will discuss a few aspects of the sociocultural and historical conflicts between the Hong Kong Chinese people and the English colonials, in order to provide the reader with

a comparison to the civil rights history between Asian Americans and white Americans.

My view is that there are many commonalities between both places, vis-à-vis the White/Other and dominant/minority relationships. Hong Kong's history regarding the development of a social welfare system, initiated by the 1967 riots that spread as a sign of discontent against the British ruling class, bears many points of resemblance to the American civil rights movement. These historical and sociocultural similarities are important elements to remember as I discuss yellowfacing in American shows produced in Hong Kong. The act takes on a different, though no less complicated/complicating meaning, in terms of its racial implications and as a representation of a racial identity. Does yellowfacing have a real and useful purpose for the performers and audience to examine what it means to be Chinese or Asian? Can it be less hurtful or politically incorrect if it takes place on the transcultural stage of Hong Kong? These are some of the wide-sweeping and ambitious questions I raise and hope to address in this study. As theatre performance is one among many ways in which Asian American identity politics are explored and expressed, I hope to add to the rich, diverse, existing discussions with an examination of two such performances in Hong Kong in recent years.

It may seem odd to the American reader that American theatre productions such as *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face* are produced in the geographically distant land of Hong Kong. Although these shows draw heavily from American historical and cultural references, there are many cross-cultural themes of identity which transcend geopolitical boundaries. When these shows were produced on the Hong Kong stage, they retained the American cultural significance of yellowfacing and racial inequality. However, the final performances took on a very different dynamic, because of the

different sociocultural history of the people involved in the production, at every level from producers to the audience, who in their own way participated in and helped shape the final performance. As Dorinne Kondo states, “theatre is a contradictory site of pleasure and contestation. [...] It matters centrally who is writing, who is performing in what venue for what audience.”¹ Removed from the immediacy of the American cultural landscape and its audience, yellowface gains an additional layer of intricacy that complicates what, for many American audiences, would be its inherent offensiveness. The stereotypes contained within these shows are a product of what Du Wenwei terms the “American domestication of the Chinese,” where “Chinese people have been portrayed as Chinese *Americans* – through a theatrical naturalization of the Chinese character” and their “dispositions and qualities have been tamed to accord with American conventional values.”² This naturalisation situates Asian American identity as “constantly shifting [in] relation to Americanness, a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation,”³ which is an unsteadiness that problematises the discussion of race in the United States. Transcultural performances of yellowface in a place like Hong Kong are codified more as an American cultural performance than a politically incorrect practice. The connection between racism and stereotyped performances of race are more tenuously linked in the Hong Kong sociocultural mindset. This presents an interesting situation where the racial offensiveness of yellowfacing is not necessarily the primary characteristic acknowledged by a Hong Kong audience. Thus, the act of

¹ Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16-17.

² Wenwei Du, *From “M. Butterfly” to “Madame Butterfly”: A Retrospective View of the Chinese Presence on Broadway* (PhD Diss., Washington University, 1992), 58. Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16-17.

³ Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 3.

yellowfacing elicits audience reactions that are different to the reactions of some politically correct American audiences.

It was an observation of one of these differences that inspired this thesis topic. When the Hong Kong production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* was in progress, the only person in my circle of theatre friends to react strongly to it—to react at all—was my friend Eric Ng, whom I interviewed for this thesis, and who would go on to direct *Yellow Face*. The fact that he was also the only Asian American within my circle of friends seemed to imply that yellowfacing held more meaning for him personally. It caused a more visceral reaction in him because (as I would find out later) he had been personally subjected to the kind of racial stereotyping that Mrs. Meers personifies on stage. I was initially surprised at what I deemed was his extreme reaction, and he in turn was surprised at everyone's lack of concern. This absence of sensitivity and difference in sensibility regarding race that can be found in Hong Kong is indicative of how important location and audience are in creating meaning to the final production.

I am not asserting that yellowfacing is not offensive. I only believe that its offensiveness makes it a very difficult topic to discuss, especially in the United States, and that a transcultural stage provides a different sociocultural context in which to examine such performances of race and race-facing. In the Hong Kong production, the offensiveness of the racially stereotypical performances was oddly muted. This mutedness may be useful as a way to examine yellowface, not only as a white institution of systematic and systemic oppression of Asian Americans, but also as a way in which Asian Americans can express and perform their racial identity, even as it is framed by whiteness.

“I have a plan so far ahead of its time it’s almost *too* bold, *too* daring!” –Millie⁴

First I will outline the framework of performance theory and explain how I utilise certain terms for the purposes of this discussion. In my section titled “limitations and considerations,” I outline briefly some of the scholarship about Asian American performance and the problems that these academics have faced. Hong Kong as a location for the performance of Asian Americanness also has its own limitations stemming from the colonial background of the city. By addressing these limitations and considerations, I hope to give the reader some knowledge of the obstacles I’ve faced in my research, so that they have a frame of reference as they read. In the main body of the paper, I analyse both shows from a literary perspective. In order to discuss the variations and implications of American texts being performed in the transcultural setting of Hong Kong, I also examine the colonial history of Hong Kong, specifically looking at the civil rights movements of the 1960s and English language education and theatre, in order to set the scene for my discussion and provide a background for the uninitiated reader. Finally, I relate the first-hand experiences of three of the participants in these two particular productions, in order to illustrate the differences they discovered between performing theatre in the United States and in Hong Kong, and what implications this change of environment had to the yellowfacing roles they played and the meaning of those performances.

A Theoretical Framework and Some Useful Terminology

Since I am writing about performance, it is necessary to establish some terms

⁴ Richard Morris and Dick Scanlan, *Thoroughly Modern Millie The Musical* (New York: MTI, n.d.), 13.

which I will use, in order to remain clear and consistent. I refer to Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory*, which offers both the appropriate terminology and framework for this examination of racial performance. Schechner states that "the drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production; the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers (technicians, too, anyone who is there.)"⁵ He visualises this framework in the form of concentric circles, with the "drama" as the smallest circle in the centre. His definitions are flexible and open, allowing for different kinds of performances (as this blanket theory does not only apply to the theatre), but can be generally understood as follows. The Drama is the words and the meaning inscribed by the playwright or book-writer. In this context, it can be seen as the simplest starting point, involving the intentions and interpretations of the playwright alone. It transcends, and can be carried between, time and place. The Script is a code of events which is transferred between people regarding the Drama, such as the blocking a director sets for the actors, which encompasses everything from the movements the actor should make, to the timing between actions and dialogue. The Theatre is the event that is enacted by the actors during the performance, which comes about as a result of the Drama and Script; it is a concretisation of the previous two concentric circles. The Performance, as the largest, all-encompassing circle, is the final event, which includes the audience, as well as any participation that is not yet included in the Drama and Script.⁶ (As these four words also have other, more commonly known meanings, I will use the

⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 85.

⁶ For another summary of Schechner's theory, please refer to "Richard Schechner: Performance Theory," last modified January 20, 2009, <http://www.icosilune.com/2009/01/richard-schechner-performance-theory/>. My description here was aided by this concise summary by Calvin Ashmore.

capitalised form of the word to indicate when it is that I am referring to this particular theoretical idea. In all other instances, I use the words in their usual meanings.)

Apart from supplying a useful set of terms to use in the discussion of performance, Schechner also offers some salient theoretical concepts which can be applied to the performances of Asian American identity in Hong Kong. *Performance Theory* discusses performance not only within the theatre but in other aspects of culture and ethnography, including play, games, sports and ritual, as well as the performance of self in daily life. He attempts to form a theory which can be applied to a wide range of situations and events. This all-encompassing view is useful here, as I attempt to situate the two performances of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face* in the transcultural context of Hong Kong. This thesis emphasises the aspect of Schechner's theory that situates each performance within a specific social atmosphere, which can in turn affect the way that we create and view that particular performance. This study is located at the junction between what Victor Turner defines as social drama and aesthetic drama, but set in the transcultural scale. Applying these theories in this thesis is my attempt to clarify a complex situation, and to provide myself with a useful theoretical approach for my purposes.

In this paper I use the term "transcultural" to describe the cultural formations that negotiate across and beyond geopolitical boundaries, more specifically between the United States and Hong Kong. In this case, the term "transnational" is problematic because Hong Kong does not qualify as a nation in the traditional sense, as the term

“nation” connotes political autonomy.⁷ It is precisely Hong Kong’s unique situation as a Special Administrative Region of China (and before that, a British colony) which gives this study particular meaning. Hong Kong is, in a unique sense of the word, beyond nation. Since the concept of nation is more abstract and impersonal, it also does not serve as well in a discussion about identity and racial representation on stage. It will be beneficial here to examine the shows as cultural entities rather than signifiers of polity.

Limitations and Considerations

There are limitations and considerations in my discussion that frame the way in which I am approaching this topic: theoretical complications; the issue of perspective and my own involvement in the shows; the persistent problems faced by scholars writing about (Asian American) performance and the genre of theatre; the state of the Asian American identity; and the postcolonial context of Hong Kong. Whilst there may not be a way to neutralise or remove these factors, they must be mentioned here and are also useful in shaping the framework for this paper, however imperfect. Let me elaborate.

Despite my attempts to anchor my discussion in a particular framework, I realise that there are inherent problems in examining these performances at each concentric layer.

⁷ Rozanna Lilley succinctly describes the problematic term of “nation” in regard to Hong Kong in her study of theatre in Hong Kong. “One of the difficulties in writing about Hong Kong is that, in any case, ‘nationalism’ is not a particularly useful word insofar as some notion of patriotic loyalty to either the Chinese or the British state is not often at issue and even movements for political autonomy are severely curtailed. Where nationalist sentiments do occur in Hong Kong they tend to take a somewhat unorthodox form. Rather than being generated by local inhabitants, nationalist rhetoric is constantly promoted by the representatives of the People’s Republic. This rhetoric involves a grand vision of the unification of the Chinese nation and maps the Hong Kong Chinese, like their Taiwanese compatriots, as part of the Chinese in China. As Sum (1995:75, 76) points out, while this form of nationalism is constantly linked to an anti-colonial stance, it is, necessarily, also completely severed from any notion of self-determination or genuine autonomy.” *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998), 25.

At the Drama level, a thorough examination of the text using literary criticism is both necessary and revealing; but it becomes too easy to fall into the trap of defining the shows' meaning by intentional or affective fallacy, even though the writers' intent and its reception form the basis of this thesis.

Whilst conducting research at the Script, Theatre and Performance levels, one of the persistent problems I faced is that of perspective. From whose perspective do I write about these performances? In my research during and after these productions, I conducted interviews with the actress who played Mrs. Meers, and I spoke to the director, and the entire cast involved in *Yellow Face*. I also issued a paper questionnaire for all the audience who attended; inevitably, the response to the questionnaire was not ideal and I also realised that I could never represent the audience experience as a whole. My own involvement in the productions is also a variable that affected the way in which I conducted the research for this thesis. In 2009, I attended a performance of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* as an academically disinterested audience member, but was inspired by the discussions of race it elicited to use this as a thesis topic. Later in 2012, I attended a *Yellow Face* rehearsal for research purposes, but eventually ended up involved in the production as stage manager. It was in this privileged role that I was allowed an inside view of the rehearsal process, and had much more time and multiple opportunities to discuss the nuances of meaning within the Drama with the director and actors. My one interview for the *Thoroughly Modern Millie* production was conducted a year after the production finished, and before the ideas for this thesis were fully formed. All of my interview subjects are friends and professional associates, which may affect my objectivity, consciously or otherwise. All these are considerations which must inevitably

affect the way in which I present this material.

The medium of theatre itself poses multiple problems. How does one write about live performance; which is ephemeral and transient in nature? Other scholars who write about Asian American performance, such as Josephine Lee, Dorinne Kondo and Karen Shimakawa, have also encountered this problem. Josephine Lee chose to base her work on the written scripts, as it is “the only part I can share on an equal footing with the reader,”⁸ but because I am writing about racial representation in theatre occurring at a specific location—that is, on a transnational stage in Hong Kong—I must reference these specific performances. For the purposes of this thesis, I addressed these concerns by focusing on three individuals whose background and roles performed I deemed to be most relevant and important to my work.

Although I use these two shows to discuss Asian American identities, I am not implying that they are representative of *all* Asian American experiences. The term “Asian American” is not cohesive and all-encompassing, but rather an attempt to generalise many different Asian cultures into a tangible group, as many Asian American scholars have previously stated. However, discussions of the Asian American experience highlight shared issues that are not limited to Asian Americans, but extend to all areas of identity politics, both in America and, as I seek to establish in this thesis, beyond American borders. In writing about the conflict in Asian American theatre between establishing a racial identity and over-generalising it, Josephine Lee states, “it seems necessary to speak of a set of shared concerns, an imagined common ground where different theatrical events might produce symbolic meaning. On the other hand, to call a playwright, a play,

⁸ Josephine D. Lee, *Performing Asian America : Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 23.

or a theater Asian American inevitably conjures an image of Asian America as a coherent whole, promoting a dangerously simplistic ‘racial’ category that erases diversity within itself.”⁹ Whilst Lee speaks specifically of the Asian American experience, this thesis attempts to extend beyond the Asian American and into the transnational experiences and performances of Asianness, in the hopes that new light may be shed on the process of performing identity.

Some existing considerations regarding the study of the performance of Asian American identity in America must be put forth before I discuss the cases in Hong Kong. Two individual points which I would particularly like to highlight are the consistent problems faced by scholars in anchoring the Asian American identity to a more stable state; and the difficulties inherent in the discussion of performance as a live act, witnessed by an audience but not recorded for posterity. Each in its own way is transient and fleeting; mixed together, they collide interestingly, but become exponentially difficult to grasp and talk about. In her book *Performing Asian America*, Josephine Lee posits that the relationship between performances in a theatre and the examination of racial identity as a form of performance are intimately related and mutually revealing:

Just as the idea of performance is crucial to studying race and ethnicity, so also is the reverse true. A study of theater and plays has much to offer current discussions of identity politics. The “liveness” or “presence” of theatre suggests an immediate, visceral response to the physicality of race; the embodiedness of theater is experienced or felt, as well as seen and heard. The physical response of the spectator to the body of the actor complicates any abstraction of social categories.

⁹ Ibid.

The theater does not let us forget that questions of racial difference concern our most basic gut reaction, experiences, and sensations. Literature and cinema or electronic media, as Ella Shohat has suggested, may be somewhat abstracted, divorced from the actual body. Theater is less capable of a divorce from the body.¹⁰

Contained in one Performance, then, are myriad elements which complicate the way in which the event is transmitted and received, even before one takes into account the external socio-historical factors beyond the Performance / outside the walls of the theatre. The actor is not a blank slate; when s/he walks on stage, s/he is a body who already carries meaning through his/her physicality and presence. The audience reacts to his/her physicality even before the first gesture or word. When this actor/body goes on to then portray a racialised character—regardless of whether that performance is deliberately based on stereotype or if it is a serious attempt at a realistic portrayal—another layer of complexity is added.

The Asian American identity, as Karen Shimakawa discusses in her book *National Abjection*, is in itself problematic, as Asian Americans cannot even be classified as subjects, securely located within a dominant/subjected relationship, because subjectiveness suggests a state of constancy in relation to the dominant power. The Asian American “occupies a role both necessary to and mutually constitutive of national subject formation – but it does not result in the formation of an Asian American subject or even an Asian American object. The abject, it is important to note, does not achieve a (stable) status of object – the term often used to describe the position of (racially or sexually)

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

disenfranchised groups in analyses of the politics of representation.”¹¹ In his book *Orientalism*, Robert G. Lee outlines the wide variations of stereotypes which have formed (or circulated around / been associated with) the Asian American identity throughout American history from the mid-19th century to current day. Two of the categories, occurring chronologically from the 1950s to today, emphasise the two extremes between which Asian American identity vacillates within the American mindset. The Model Minority, originating from Cold War liberalism, was used to help contain the menace of the unseen enemy of communism and those who did not conform to mainstream America’s idea of a fully integrated immigrant. According to Lee, this relatively harmless and positive stereotype was replaced with the stereotype of the Gook in 1970, where “Asian Americans [were] represented as the agents of foreign or multinational capital. In this narrative of national decline, Asian American success [was] seen as a camouflage for subversion.”¹² All of a sudden, what was previously upheld as an example of the perfect embodiment of American self-made success was an immediate threat to white American success. Lee’s book, published in 1999, does not include the (no doubt) myriad changes since then. These vacillations highlight the perpetual state of flux in which the Asian American identity finds itself. Despite the two considerations of the ephemeral nature of performance and the instability of the Asian American body, the performances in Hong Kong allowed my three interviewees to replicate the process of exploring their own Asian American identity on a transcultural scale, and in certain ways, on their own terms.

Finally, the multi-layered complexities of Hong Kong, stemming from a rich

¹¹ Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 3.

¹² Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 11.

sociocultural history are added to the mix. Any discussion about the culture and heritage of Hong Kong inevitably turns to the colonial past of the city. This is probably due to two reasons. Firstly, any existing cultural heritage is potentially politically charged and can be seen as an unwelcome Western influence, and as a reminder of British colonisation.

Oftentimes, a discussion in the media about what constitutes “Hong Kong people” or a “Hong Kong identity” can quickly turn controversial, due to the political climate in the territory. Calls for the clarification of a collective identity are often (mis)understood to be a call for independence from China or a move towards democracy, which is severely frowned upon by the mainland Chinese government. Anthropologist Rozanna Lilley argues that the term “Hong Kong people” is not “a call for some homogenous ethnic identity or more transparent national space. It is, rather, an attempt to grasp people’s positioning as individual and collective subjects.”¹³ This is strongly reminiscent of the same problematic term of “Asian American,” which also connotes a sense of collectiveness and universality which is not necessarily inherent. Lilley also notes that there is an “indigenous argument that Hong Kong people are in a privileged position to examine Chinese and Western culture in a critical way; that the very lack of an established identity is an asset.”¹⁴ It is this absence of identity which makes Hong Kong a particularly interesting place in which to hold discussions about racial identity.

Secondly, any new creativity occurring in Hong Kong is oftentimes judged by Western standards, which in itself is problematic because it echoes the colonial influence and does not allow local creativity to exist in its own space, independent of Western influences. The preface for the 2000 Chinese publication *Transcending Cultural Map*

¹³ Rozanna Lilley, *Staging Hong Kong*, 70.

¹⁴ Ibid., 87-8.

states:

The nature or status of culture in Hong Kong has never been judged from the city's own perspective; it is always what "outsiders" said that counts. The British, as the colonial ruler, looked at the issue with a sense of superiority, whereas those in cultural circles of mainland China saw it more or less through spectacles tinted with a second-hand hue of colonialist condescension. In the end, even Hong Kongers accepted the verdict of "cultural desert," joking about it at their own expense, and the local multitudes have taken cultureless pleasures for granted. What else can Hong Kong people say when all the rest of the world maintains that their hometown has no culture, can't possibly have a culture, or even doesn't deserve a culture?¹⁵

In this point of view, discussing theatre as a cultural indicator of Hong Kong society and culture is problematic. English language plays and musicals are a relatively selective pastime that is based on the financial and language abilities of the individual, and which undoubtedly have colonial / postcolonial / Western influences. In my introduction, I have already touched on the similarities between Hong Kong's racial history and that of the minority experience in the United States. I believe that the current body of work dealing with Asian American or Chinese American identity, while profound, meaningful and necessary, has focused primarily on the American part of the hyphenate and somewhat neglected the prefix. By examining aspects of the prefix, Asian Americanness might find the space to be less in the position of the subordinate/other, and more empowered to become an identity that is not measured only in juxtaposition to the dominant culture.

¹⁵ Pei-ka Cheng and Ka-fai Ma, *Transcending Cultural Map* (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 2000), preface, trans. Allen Zhuang, at "Hong Kong Culture: A Mobile Type," Chinese Civilization Centre, accessed August 11, 2014, <http://www.english.cciv.cityu.edu.hk/home/mobile.php>

Shimakawa states that “on a national/cultural scale Asian Americanness is what must be abjected in order to constitute a coherent, normative U.S. American identity that may be differentiated from and against other nationalities; and as abject, Asian Americanness is necessarily denied a legitimate (or even recognizable) position from which to speak, and, more important, it is denied a voice in which to speak within U.S. American discourse”¹⁶.

It is precisely this “national/cultural scale” that I focus on in this thesis. I believe the *transnational/transcultural* scale plays a pivotal role in shifting the way in which Asian Americanness is understood, not necessarily by making the Asian American position less abject, but by allowing it a voice which can speak outside of the “U.S. American discourse.”¹⁷ This approach on a different scale is not a problem solver, but a sounding board for those problems based on a newer, less American-centric approach.

In order to do this, we must first examine the existing stereotypes in the yellowface performances found in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face*, through the medium of literary analysis.

A State of Perpetual Abjection: An Examination of the Racial Stereotypes in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*

Thoroughly Modern Millie is a comic pastiche which debuted on Broadway in 2002 and won the Tony award for Best Musical that same year. It is based on the 1967 Julie Andrews movie of the same name, although some changes were made to the stage adaptation. The plot in both versions is complicated, involving multiple characters and interweaving subplots. The plot in the stage version is as follows. It is 1922, and the

¹⁶ Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 87.

¹⁷ Ibid.

female protagonist, Millie Dillmount, moves to New York to escape little town life. She is a “modern,” a forward thinking woman determined to “take charge of her destiny”¹⁸ by finding and marrying a boss—any boss—in a practical “business arrangement.” She believes that “love comes later, occasionally, with the man you’re actually married to.”¹⁹ She meets Jimmy, an ex-paper clip salesman, in a chance encounter on her first day in the city. Millie boards at the Hotel Priscilla, Residence for Young Ladies, which is run by the evil Mrs. Meers, the white hotel proprietress who pretends to be Chinese by performing a ridiculous caricature in yellowface. Two coolie-type laundrymen, Bun Foo and Ching Ho, are unwilling accomplices in Mrs. Meers’s secret profession: dealing in the abduction of white orphaned women, who are “shanghaied to Hong Kong”²⁰ and sold into “White Slavery”²¹ as streetwalkers. They work for her in a deal wherein their mother would be brought over from Hong Kong to America “in exchange for services rendered.”²² Millie finds a job working as “the fastest stenog in the nation”²³ for Trevor Graydon, and also befriends Miss Dorothy, a rich orphan who moves into the hotel to experience the lifestyle of the struggling class. Miss Dorothy becomes Millie’s love rival for both Mr. Graydon and Jimmy’s affections, as well as Mrs. Meers’s next abduction target. At the same time, Millie struggles with her growing feelings for Jimmy, who brings her to a party at the famous black entertainer Muzzy Van Hossmere’s home. After several botched attempts, Mrs. Meers kidnaps Miss Dorothy. Millie and Jimmy realise something is amiss, and together with Mr. Graydon and Muzzy, set a trap to catch Mrs. Meers in the act of

¹⁸ Morris and Scanlan, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 36.

²³ *Ibid.*, 75.

abduction. Bun Foo and Ching Ho, independent of the others, try to prevent Mrs. Meers's nefarious schemes, but are (inexplicably) unsuccessful until the end. Mrs. Meers's plan is foiled, if somewhat haphazardly, by several characters. Ching Ho manages to communicate to Miss Dorothy the danger she faces and stows her away in a laundry basket. Muzzy poses as an orphan, and while being abducted by Mrs. Meers, recognises her for her real identity, the criminal Daisy Crumpler. Millie eavesdrops from another laundry cart and uses her skills as stenographer to record what Mrs. Meers says in response to Muzzy's accusations of abduction. Mrs. Meers denies the accusations and asks for proof, at which point Bun Foo shows up and miraculously begins to repeat in English what he has overheard Mrs. Meers say during her previous abductions, providing the required proof. Millie inevitably falls in love with Jimmy and discovers that he is actually heir to a large fortune, and Muzzy is his stepmother. Miss Dorothy turns out to be Jimmy's sister and ditches Trevor Graydon for Ching Ho. Ching Ho and Bun Foo's mother shows up and a family reunion provides the final tableau.

Out of all the updates and changes made from the original movie plot to the musical, I wish to examine the few that pertain most to the way in which race, through the bodies of the Chinese men juxtaposed to the white female antagonist in yellowface, is performed and represented. This may be discovered through an examination of the stage directions for both Bun Foo / Ching Ho and Mrs. Meers. Language plays a big part in the formation of the "authenticity" of Bun Foo and Ching Ho's Chineseness. In the film version, they speak in gibberish and guttural sounds; are stock characters used as comic relief; and are named only in the film credits as "Oriental No. 1" and "Oriental No. 2." In the new stage version, they are given names and an active, if somewhat problematic,

purpose in the plot. They have lines and songs, but only speak in the Cantonese dialect and sing in Putonghua, all which must be accompanied by the use of projected English surtitles. The writers placed emphasis on the necessity of linguistic accuracy, in order to illustrate the fakeness of Mrs. Meers's yellowfacing. This raises questions about why racial authenticity must be proved, and why "real" Chineseness can only be established in juxtaposition to the "fake" Chineseness that is represented by yellowfacing. The role they play in the plot and its denouement is another problematic area, as they are the only people who know Mrs. Meers's true identity from the start, but are prevented by a series of plot devices (the most telling of which is the language divide) from revealing this information until the appropriate time. The romantic subplot between Ching Ho and Miss Dorothy is also something which I will discuss, as it does not eliminate the stereotype of the sexless Chinese male as much as it warps it. If we use Homi Bhabha's definition, that "the stereotype is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated,"²⁴ the writers' attempt to update the material to suit a twenty-first century politically sensitive audience is an example of that vacillation of stereotype within colonial discourse, which Robert G. Lee says is "stubbornly resistant to eradication."²⁵

The descriptions (in the form of stage directions) of Bun Foo and Ching Ho are a fascinating place to examine the process by which representation of race is conceptualised at the authorial level. Whilst an examination of the Drama (i.e. "what the writer writes") is a point of interest here, I am aware of the problems with becoming too reliant upon intentional or affective fallacy to deduce the meaning of the final product. An

²⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66.

²⁵ Lee, preface to *Orientalists*, xi.

audience at a performance would not be privy to these stage directions, but instead will only see the product of others interpreting and putting into action those directions. With all this in consideration, I examine the stage directions in the Drama, as they specifically address the way in which the writers think race should and can be performed or represented. The representation of Bun Foo and Ching Ho is constructed around the concept of linguistic accuracy and in juxtaposition to Mrs. Meers's fake Asian act. Their inability to communicate in or understand English is useful in the plot as a comedic tool, and to delay the demise of Mrs. Meers until the dramatic end. They hold the key to the real identity of Mrs. Meers and thus cannot be allowed (by the writers) to reveal it immediately, otherwise there would be no plot tension and the denouement would come too soon. This dramatic consideration does not fully explain the author's extreme concern and involvement with the way in which the "actual Asian characters" are performed:

Note that throughout the play, Ching Ho and Bun Foo speak in Cantonese and sing in Putonghua. Do not attempt to decipher their dialogue and/or lyrics phonetically. In the interest of accuracy—which is unequivocally the Author's intent—an audio instructional guide to the correct pronunciation is available. In addition the English translation of the Chinese must be translated to the audience. The Broadway production employed supertitles on a screen hung over the stage. There are other ways to handle the translation, from high-tech to handheld signs, but in the script, the term "supertitle" will be used to indicate that the Chinese being spoken or sung must somehow be translated to the audience. Whatever device is used, the pacing of our first scene between Ching Ho and Bun Foo should give the audience time to adjust to watching the action while reading the

translation.²⁶

It is very interesting to see that, despite the writers' determination to stick to accuracy, they do not insist that the actors playing the parts should be Chinese actors fluent in both languages.²⁷ (Certainly that would make the process a lot easier on the actors, and slightly closer to the "authenticity" that the writers are supposedly attempting to attain.) While I hesitate to say that the writers are racist, I believe that however well-intentioned they might be in trying to bust Asian stereotypes by outing Mrs. Meers's yellowfacing with the use of "authentic" Chinese characters as a foil, it is a misguided attempt. It (almost) misses the point entirely, that of supposedly dispelling a stereotype. The concept of what is Asian has always fluctuated between and around the stereotypes this musical recreates—the Dragon Lady (albeit a white one) and the coolie, to name but two. It's impossible to break one stereotype with another stereotype; it becomes an infinite cycle of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. While it is impossible (and dangerous) to deduce the writers' intentions from a literary reading alone, I wonder why there is such an overt insistence on the accurate portrayal of Asianness in a pastiche where almost everything and everyone else is ridiculous. So many aspects of the show are absurd, from the empty-headed caricatures of Miss Dorothy and Trevor Graydon, to the elevator that only works when those riding it tap dance. These aspects already require the audience to have a healthy suspension of disbelief. An audience member who would take the

²⁶ Morris and Scanlan, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, 17.

²⁷ The case with the Broadway Junior Version of this musical tells a different story, however. The website of the theatrical licensing agency MTI states in the casting section that the parts of Bun Foo and Ching Ho can certainly be played by non-Asian child actors. "While it's nice to cast performers of Asian descent in these roles, it is not always possible. These characters must learn some Chinese, so cast kids who live for great challenges and have a keen sense of adventure. Ching Ho must be played by a boy and is the more demanding role; Bun Foo can be played by a girl. These characters sing, dance, and act, all in Chinese." Please refer to Music Theatre International, "Thoroughly Modern Millie Jr," last accessed September 9, 2014, http://www.mtishows.com/show_detail.asp?showid=000307.

ridiculousness literally would also not likely understand the nuances of the racial performance and its authorial intent. It seems to be the writers' excuse to revive an outdated show containing politically incorrect stereotyping. By singling out the Asians for special representation on stage, it weakens the fourth wall and ceases to be autotelic. Such treatment almost stands out like an asterisk/disclaimer, excusing the rehashing of old Asian American stereotypes in the name of (staged) authenticity, in a situation where authenticity carries little meaning.

The stage directions regarding the representation of Mrs. Meers are equally revealing. In front of the white flapper girls staying at Hotel Priscilla, she speaks in pidgin English, which is supposed to fool no-one but those on stage.

Mrs. Meers enters from her office, carrying a stack of mail. A former actress-turned-criminal, she utilizes her acting skills by adopting a disguise of a kindly Chinese proprietess [sic] of the hotel to mask her real profession: White Slavery. Her disguise extends to her clothes, her wig, her make-up, even her dialect. It's not important that Mrs. Meers' Chinese act be good, but it's essential that SHE think it brilliant. The offensiveness of her politically incorrect rendering of Asian, confident in the knowledge that, when contrasted with the actual Asian characters we meet later on, her depiction of a hateful stereotype will be busted as inauthentic and absurd [sic].

Note that, for the sake of clarity, whenever Mrs. Meers' dialogue is intended to be spoken in a "Chinese" accent, it will appear in bold print. Thus her first line might sound something like "Sad to be awe arone in da whirld. Dough none of you need wolly, not with your beeg, warm famiries." The foregoing example is intended as

a suggestion only: there have been as many Mrs. Meers' "Chinese" dialects as there have been actresses who have played Mrs. Meers. A word of caution: no matter how extreme her "Chinese" accent, it must be easily intelligible to the audience.²⁸

Although the term "yellow face" is never used in the above stage direction, direct references to Mrs. Meers's "disguise," encompassing everything from her clothing to her speech and her makeup, clearly indicate that the writers fully intend that the character of Mrs. Meers should be performed in yellowface. The writers imply that this yellowfacing is important within the plot for two reasons. Firstly, it functions as an indicator of her role as the story's chief antagonist (and reproduction of the yellow peril stereotype) and as a disguise used to fool the other characters. She morphs into an extreme caricature in the stage version, where the actress portraying her is given license to be as offensive as the director deems acceptable or necessary. (In the Hong Kong production, the actress added the gesture of pulling her eyelids slant at every repetition of the line "Sad to be all alone in the world.") This is a definite shift from the film version, where the actress Beatrice Lillie delivered her lines as Mrs. Meers in a proper English accent. As the writers retained and enhanced the act of yellowface, the disguise that Mrs. Meers chooses and her evil persona are inevitably mixed together, creating a site of possible confusion for the audience. Regardless of the writers' intent, the stereotype of the Dragon Lady is thus put forth again. The extreme ridiculousness of her caricature in juxtaposition to the "authentic" Chinese characters is used as a marker for phoniness (and her criminality, at least for a clued-in audience), but the non-Asian characters on stage are fooled into believing her act

²⁸ Ibid., 8.

as genuine. The audience, especially one who is not aware of the writers' intention, may misinterpret this disguise as stereotype, which links back to the problem of affective fallacy and the social implications of re-using stereotypes as parody.

In the musical, Ching Ho wins the heart of the rich white Miss Dorothy, making him a romantic lead (of sorts). In the movie version, Miss Dorothy falls for Millie's boss Trevor Graydon, but in the musical he becomes just a passing fancy and is later brushed off as a case of puppy love, in favour of Ching Ho. On the surface, these plot and characterisation changes seem like an improvement from the emasculated Asian male stereotype reminiscent of Charlie Chan. A closer look, however, reveals that these changes conceal and complicate issues more than they improve things. The love between Ching Ho and Miss Dorothy, for example, is rooted in deviance. The romantic connection between Miss Dorothy and Ching Ho echoes the fear and taboo of miscegenation that occurred in America from the days of slavery. This kind of deviation is what Foeman and Nance call the "mythology" of the supposed psychological issues of the Black-White couple.²⁹ Miss Dorothy's infatuation with the idea of living the rough life, despite being secretly wealthy, indicates her abnormality. She meets Millie and exclaims with excitement, "My very first poor person!"³⁰ The song "How The Other Half Lives" celebrates her decline from riches, even though it is only temporary. It comes as no surprise that at the end she also transgresses the norm in her romantic life by choosing the desperately devoted Ching Ho over the white male, Trevor Graydon. She fits Foeman and

²⁹ Anita Kathy Foeman and Teresa Nance, "From Miscegenation to Multiculturalism: Perceptions and Stages of Interracial Relationship Development," *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Mar., 1999): 542.

³⁰ Morris and Scanlan, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, 13.

Nance's category of "white neurotic acting out."³¹ Her case is the exception, not the norm. One senses that her dalliance with Ching Ho may not be a lasting one, but is simply part of the temporary change enforced upon her by her stepmother, Muzzy. Ching Ho falls in love with Miss Dorothy when he first lays eyes on her, and she is the only person who can divert Ching Ho from his commitment to saving his mother. For the musical number "Muqin" ("Mother" in Putonghua), Ching Ho is on the verge of standing up against Mrs. Meers for the sake of saving Miss Dorothy. Just as he threatens to become a character with real agency, Mrs. Meers successfully lures him back into her control by appealing to his sense of filial piety. She waves a photo of their mother in front of them and they sing (in Putonghua): "We'd walk a million miles for one of those smiles / We'll lead a life of crime to buy us some time."³² These are men who are clearly controlled by the women in their lives, whether it be by coercion, infatuation, piety or Oedipal complex. (He gets the girl, but not because he's masculine—it's because she's weird.) Bun Foo and Ching Ho, when compared to the other male characters in the show, still reinforce the stereotype of the emasculated Asian man. Ching Ho becomes the saviour by sneaking behind Mrs. Meers's back to warn Miss Dorothy, but only by risking his mother's chances. Either way, it is not a positive representation. He reacts impulsively, driven more by passion than logic, whilst Jimmy, Trevor and Millie go about entrapping Mrs. Meers through a concerted effort. Bun Foo also contributes to the downfall of Mrs. Meers by suddenly and miraculously learning how to speak English and giving the evidence needed to prove Mrs. Meers a fraud. (One wonders at this point why he didn't come forward with this proof before.) Ching Ho is then found in a passionate embrace

³¹ Foeman and Nance, "From Miscegenation to Multiculturalism," 543.

³² Morris and Scanlan, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, 63.

with Miss Dorothy, and he declares his love for her with a vow of death.

From offstage MISS DOROTHY's voice is heard. [...]

MISS DOROTHY: *(Sings)* Ah! Sweet mystery of life at last I've found thee.

MR. GRAYDON: Miss Dorothy! *(Mr. Graydon takes a breath to sing in response as Bun Foo tears down the sheets center stage, revealing Ching Ho and Miss Dorothy locked in an embrace.)*

CHING HO: Ah! Wo ming bai sheng ming de yi yi liao *(Supertitle: Ah! I know at last the secret of it all.)*

Ching Ho and Miss Dorothy kiss passionately.

MR. GRAYDON: What about me?

MISS DOROTHY: Puppy love Trevor. I thought it was the real thing, but then Ching Ho rescued me from an unspeakable fate.

CHING HO: I would die for you, Miss Dorothy!

MISS DOROTHY: I love that!³³

Angela C. Pao and reviewer Roger W. Tang of the online *Asian American Theatre Revue* consider the new Bun Foo and Ching Ho as an improvement upon the old stereotype of the sexless Chinese male. Ching Ho's success "turns on its head previous approaches to Crushes-Held-by-Asian-Men-On-Pure-Virginal-White-Maidens."³⁴ However, Miss Dorothy does not fit this description, as shown by her deviant spurning of wealth and the conventional manly white lover. However, her dalliance with Ching Ho

³³ Ibid., 76-7.

³⁴ Roger W. Tang, "The REVUE Takes in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*," *Asian American Theatre Revue*, last modified 2002, <http://www.aatrevue.com/Old/Millie.html>, quoted in Angela C. Pao, "Green Glass and Emeralds: Citation, Performance, and the Dynamics of Ethnic Parody in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, Volume 36, Number 4, Winter 2011, 46.

seems as much as a flight of fancy as her experimental life as a poor girl. She is not portrayed as someone who is truly aware of the reality of her surroundings—her life in the “real” world is only transient. She knows that her experience of “how the other half lives” is only temporary. She will inevitably return to her life as an heiress, but in the meantime she is free from social norms. Her love for Ching Ho is not based on any traditional notions of love, but instead she is charmed by the idea that he would give his life for her. She is thus in the position of control and power that is traditionally occupied by the man. The Asian man gets the white girl, but only through sacrificing himself, his mother, or by saving the object of his desire from the “unspeakable fate” of white prostitution in Hong Kong, or the mundanity of being married to a boring, conventional white man. This suggests that there is no way that an Asian male will ever be desirable to a white woman for his normal sexual appeal.

Tang also argues that the Asian characters in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* are not singled out for derogatory treatment based on their race. “Some progressive critics may fret that these Chinese characters are clueless clowns [...], except that EVERY character in this show acts like clueless clowns. The Asian characters are treated no worse and no better than anyone else in the show, but are NOT gratuitously stereotyped on racial grounds.”³⁵ While it is perhaps true that Bun Foo and Ching Ho are not characterised as any more or less intelligent than the other characters, they are represented differently through the mode of language, singled out from the crowd of clueless clowns by the way they express themselves to the audience. As seen in the stage directions, the writers wanted to inject a greater amount of authenticity and relevance to the Asian characters,

³⁵ Ibid.

allowing for the use of their native language in the context of a traditional American musical. However, the way in which their racial identity is represented denies them full participation in the plot until the denouement. Even when they are suddenly un-muted, they cannot be the ones solely responsible for saving the day. They are able to participate in the great tradition of the American musical, but only as outsiders, to be understood via proxy. Bun Foo and Ching Ho cannot be removed from the Drama without compromising the adaptation of the film, yet they cannot be allowed full voices as that would jeopardise the integrity of the plot. Much of their identity is linked to their use of language—their inability to communicate is in part humorous (when Mrs. Meers tries to communicate with them) and in part necessary. (When Ching Ho tries to warn Miss Dorothy about Mrs. Meers and fails miserably, this allows the audience to understand that the Chinese men are not evil, but helpless—and hopeless.)

Language as a marker of difference is an established concept, and despite the writer's stated intent that they wished to represent the Chinese characters in a more authentic way, that authenticity does not necessarily ensure that it will allow the audience to understand that it is not a reinvented stereotype, or make the characters more relatable to that audience. According to Pao, "the show substitutes new caricatures for old. These new caricatures are designed to counter two of the most deeply entrenched dominant culture characterizations of Asians and Asian Americans—the characterization of Asians in America as perpetual and inassimilable foreigners and the characterization of the Asian male as sexually undesirable."³⁶ However, Bhabha states that stereotype "must be

³⁶ Angela C. Pao, "Green Glass and Emeralds: Citation, Performance, and the Dynamics of Ethnic Parody in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, Volume 36, Number 4, Winter 2011, 46.

anxiously repeated” and that its ambivalence “ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures.”³⁷ In my opinion, the efforts of the writers of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* aren’t as successful in overturning stereotype as they wished to be, if that is indeed what they wished. All that is presented in the characters of Ching Ho and Bun Foo is a past stereotype, *not* an authentic person. Simple proof is in the language. Someone who speaks in Cantonese is likely to sing in Cantonese too, and vice versa. Cantonese has nine tones, while Putonghua has four; Cantonese is localised to southern China while Putonghua is the country’s standardised language; and they sound completely different, to the point that the speaker of one would find the other almost unintelligible. If a Chinese laundry worker in the United States during 1922 were to sing, it would likely not be a show tune with Putonghua lyrics. There is a possible functional purpose to the use of Putonghua as the singing language. Conversational Cantonese is much more informally structured and can sometimes have syntactical variations to Putonghua, whereas Putonghua is more standardised. The pronunciation of certain words in Cantonese can make words harder to rhyme, although this was not the case when I attempted a sample translation of the song “Muqin.” The authors’ artistic decision to divide dialogue and lyrics along linguistic lines remains a mystery.

It almost seems pointless to attempt to represent the Chinese characters accurately in a show filled with other two-dimensional characters, especially when stereotype and caricature can be so easily confused. I would even cautiously argue that a musical, especially a pastiche, is not the place where authenticity should be the leading concern, especially when that authenticity is selectively applied to certain aspects of the show

³⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 66.

(although this argument itself raises more questions about authenticity in performance).

While Bun Foo and Ching Ho are required to give performances of “actual Asians,” the much more sinister subtext of yellow peril is alive and well in the presence of Mrs. Meers. If one were to extend the logic of the writer regarding the representation of Asianness to the character of African American entertainer Muzzy Van Hossmere, would she need to perform in juxtaposition to a blackface minstrel in order to be believable? Why is Asianness the only racial element in the show which requires juxtaposition in order to be authenticated? The Chinese are indeed represented on stage, but only on terms set by and voices interpreted by the dominant culture (i.e. the writers). It seems that “true” authenticity is still widely open to (white) interpretation and can be learned through the use of an audio instructional guide. This implies that racial authenticity can be simulated and that the race of the actor doesn’t matter, as long as the audience understands that the characters are Asian. As the writers do not insist that the actors who play the roles must be ethnically Chinese (or Asian—they’re oddly silent on that front), language seems to be the only important marker of accurate identity, and even then it is just a crude mimicry of it. (If you follow these simple instructions, you can become Chinese in two weeks! No-one will know the difference! Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back!) As an “authentic” Chinese person is not allowed to speak in English on stage (at least until the time is right), the power of communication is not theirs— they remain perpetual outsiders, in spite of their “accurate” Chinese. Would a non-Chinese speaker in the audience know the difference, anyway? Would it even matter? It seems that an official commitment to authenticity of one racial marker (or the intent towards it) is license to re-use stereotypes for entertainment all over again.

This, in conjunction with Mrs. Meers's use of yellowface as an artificial-but-apparently-passable Chinese body embodying a nefarious threat, makes the representation of Bun Foo and Ching Ho a highly contentious instance of racial performance. It is a representation of extremes—the perpetually abject Asian American can only be proved authentic when set in juxtaposition to a ridiculous other, but still remains an outsider.

The resounding defense that Angela Pao gives for the representation of Bun Foo and Ching Ho is that if the audience and critics disagree with the reconceptualisation, they are “mistaking postmodern camp for retrograde repetitions”³⁸ and are simply missing the point. Pao points out that “professional reviewers who could be assumed to have higher levels of cultural competency and to be well versed in various protocols of spectatorship” would in many cases “completely [miss] the multi-layered dimensions of the ethnic parodies.” If this was the case, she states, then “it was undoubtedly the case with many other members of the audience as well.”³⁹ By refusing the question the validity of reviving and reinterpreting *Thoroughly Modern Millie* in the first place, Pao and others are placing the responsibility of understanding all meaning and any subsequent misinterpretation squarely on the shoulders of the (passive) audience, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that that same audience falls short of “getting” it. Pao accuses the audience of affective fallacy while she commits the crime of intentional fallacy. It is an incredibly circular argument which still begs the question: What is the purpose of intentionally rehashing Asian American stereotypes?

To conclude this literary analysis of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, it is important to

³⁸ Pao, “Green Glass and Emeralds”, 51.

³⁹ Ibid.

note that the writers were already aware of the complexities surrounding racial performance of the Chinese characters, and addressed the performance at the authorial level. It's also important to remember that the audience would not be able to see the writers' involvement just from attending a performance, and that their intention is masked by the contributions of other parties, such as the director and the actors, at the levels of Script and Theatre. Academically speaking, it may be easier to dissect and analyse the show from an examination of the Drama as it the most basic element which may be shared equally between people. Performances are harder to discuss, as there is no common point of reference shared between the academic writer and the reader; but as I have illustrated above, both approaches have the serious flaws of being too weighted on the sides of intentional or affective fallacy. There is simply no way of circumventing these issues, except to try to do justice to both, equally. Despite being more difficult to discuss, it is vital to examine the performance of race beyond the Drama, especially in the case of transcultural performances such as the ones that occurred in Hong Kong. It allows us to move beyond the text and see what happens when the roles are taken on by individuals whose personal experiences of race affect the way in which they view and perform these roles.

An Alternative Kind of Yellowfacing in *Yellow Face*: An Asian American Answer to Performing Race

In the play *Yellow Face*, playwright David Henry Hwang uses comedy and the boundary between truth and fiction to address themes of racial identity and what it means to be Asian American. It was originally inspired by the controversy in 1990 over the

casting of the white actor Jonathan Pryce in the Asian role of The Engineer in the musical *Miss Saigon*. Protests erupted over the offensiveness of an actor in yellowface as well as the seeming unwillingness of the producers to audition Asian actors for the role. The fracas is well documented both in the media and academic work. Today, yellowface and blackface are considered highly offensive, but the practice was commonplace in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It occurs when white actors use make-up to approximate the skin colour and appearance of a minority race, and use tomfoolery to poke fun at them. A good example of this would be Mickey Rooney in the Audrey Hepburn film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, as well as the aforementioned Mrs. Meers. The *Miss Saigon* controversy seemed to be a step back in time to pre-civil rights movement days, as well as reflecting the consistent lack of employment opportunities for actors of Asian descent. Eventually, Jonathan Pryce was allowed to play the part, after a backlash of protests claiming reverse racism against the Caucasian actor, as well as constraints of artistic freedom.

Yellow Face examines the definition of race and questions its validity in a time of increasing multiculturalism, transnationalism and third culture kids. The concept of “face” in this play is two-fold. It is the face which others see, which involves your outward appearance and the stereotypes attached to the colour of your skin, over which you have no control. It also refers to the active face you display to other people and the performative aspect of your personal identity. Hwang blurs and mixes these two concepts of face in order to create an inconsistency which elicits laughter at the absurdity of the situation his characters face. The character of DHH becomes an outsider for expressing opinions that are seen as incongruous with the beliefs of the Asian American community

at large. At the same time, the character of Marcus blends seamlessly into the role of an Asian American, despite being white. This challenges the traditional construct of racial identity and how it can become something which is fluid instead of fixed along racial lines. In the second act, the plot takes an ominous turn as a witch-hunt against Asian Americans takes place, based on the Wen Ho Lee espionage incident in 1998-99, which involved Hwang's own father Henry Y. Hwang and his bank being investigated as possible sources of illegal campaign contributions in 1999.

Yellow Face is a quick-fire play where reality and fiction are mixed. The play does not conform to the traditional structure of a play where there are clear transitions in between scenes. It reads much like the author's stream-of-consciousness recollection of what happened at the time, both publicly and privately. At the very start, we meet Marcus G. Dahlman reading an email he wrote to the lead character DHH, during his trip to Guizhou Province, China. The fact that Marcus is a fictionalised character is not revealed until the very end of the play, but as he is the character who opens the play and who the audience first see, it makes this final revelation all the more shocking and shows how intentionally the playwright meant to blur the boundaries between truth and fiction. Within the first six pages of dialogue, Hwang quickly summarises all of the main opinions expressed during the 1990 controversy over the Jonathan Pryce casting in *Miss Saigon*. Hwang uses an ensemble cast of four people, moving in and out of various roles as they come up in chronological order, to forward the plot and tell the background story without it becoming too tediously bogged down in facts and "he said / she said" arguments. Because of this fast-moving plot, however, it also becomes difficult to distinguish fact from fiction, and the audience is forced to take the script seriously,

especially as there is a formal voice in the form of The Announcer, whose sole job is to announce the names of the participants, the media organisations and the dates of the publications from which official quotes are taken and used. Hwang uses these dramatic techniques to trick the audience into believing everything that is said is truth. As the play progresses, it becomes more obvious how Hwang tries to build up this sense of authority and trustworthiness, in order to break it down at the right time in the plot and illustrate to the audience that they, too, must question what they think is real, such as racial identity itself. There is a line in the play which summarises this idea succinctly: “Is race a construct which is still useful or is it mythological?”⁴⁰

The character of Marcus is a perfect example of the constructedness of racial identity. DHH, in a desperate casting move, makes a conscious effort to promote Marcus as Eurasian. He is subsequently thoroughly embarrassed when Marcus takes his new racial identity wholeheartedly by adopting it in his real life, from participating in Asian American activism to dating DHH’s ex-girlfriend, who believes that Marcus is Asian. DHH resents Marcus as a symbol of all his (imagined) deficiencies, because Marcus is more celebrated as an Asian American role model than he is. DHH eventually confronts Marcus about his racial duplicity. The exchange highlights how racial identity fluctuates between reality and invention, and how all aspects of racial identity are, to a certain extent, based on performances and the putting on of a “face” or mask. The fiction is pervasive and controlling to those who are its subjects and/or who are subjected to its power. All participants have much to gain and lose by the maintenance of this fiction.

DHH. You’re running around. Pretending to be Asian. You’re lying! To everyone!

⁴⁰ David Henry Hwang, *Yellow Face*, (Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2008), 18.

There – can you follow that? (Pause)

MARCUS. I am trying really hard not to lie. Okay, now and then, I have to mention the Siberian thing,⁴¹ and that's unfortunate, but, as much as possible – I am doing my best to speak only the truth.

DHH. Your whole life is a lie! You're letting people believe –

MARCUS. You said it yourself, didn't you? It doesn't matter what someone looks like on the outside.

DHH. I didn't mean that literally!

MARCUS. Then how did you mean it? David, do you have a problem with anything I'm saying?

DHH. No, it's not *what* you're saying -

MARCUS. It's that *I'm* the one who's saying it? Doesn't that make your position kind of racist?

DHH. This is not that hard! In order to be Asian you have to have at least some Asian blood!

MARCUS. I'm just saying some things that need to be said. Doing things that need to be done. I mean, *someone's* gotta step up.

DHH. What's that supposed to mean?

MARCUS. To be perfectly honest, I've been attending a lot of community functions lately. And I don't see you at any of them.

[...]

DHH. I was an Asian American role model back when you were still a Caucasian!

⁴¹ Marcus's Asian background is supposed to Russian Siberian Asian Jews—a story DHH made up for him.

MARCUS. David, c'mon – is this a popularity contest?

DHH. No. I am not in a popularity contest with you.

MARCUS. This is about collective empowerment, agreed?

DHH. Fuck. That's so easy for you to say.

MARCUS. What?

DHH. You come in here with that, that face of yours. Call yourself Asian.

Everyone falls at your feet. But you don't have to live as an Asian – every day of your life. No, you can just skim the cream, you, you, you ethnic tourist!

MARCUS. You're right. I don't *have* to live Asian every day of my life. I am *choosing* to do so.

DHH. Funny thing about race. You don't get to choose. If you'd been born a minority, you'd know that.⁴²

Apart from the personal struggles and conflicts that come along with activism, *Yellow Face* also highlights how politics in the public sphere can also find its way into the personal lives of those involved. Hwang's dramatisation of the Wen Ho Lee interrogation, as well as the various newspaper headlines, are woven into the play parallel to the scenes involving the characters' personal interactions, which help illustrate how the public and private, the personal and political are closely interlinked and fused together. DHH encourages Marcus to take on a new race and ambiguous last name to supposedly further Marcus's professional life, but in actuality it is a self-serving move that will save DHH from the embarrassment of his own mistake in casting Marcus in a Eurasian role, in part because of his over-anxiety to save his own face from the humiliation he encountered

⁴² Ibid., 39-40.

during the *Miss Saigon* backlash, and to showcase a masculine Asian male actor in order to prove his point. Layer upon layer of deception is needed to keep this lie going, and Marcus's unexpected success as an Asian American actor and social activist really brings to light just how much racial identity is a construction. I would suggest that one of the reasons why this is so believable is because questions about self and identity are universal, not just bound by race. The scene where Marcus is interviewed by Asian American students is also the place where he first identifies his own struggles with identity:

STUDENT #3. Was growing up hard for you?

DHH. (To Marcus:) Yeah it was, right?

MARCUS. Well, yeah – see, when I was seven, my parents moved to this fancy neighbourhood because it had good schools. But that made me sort of... the poor kid in town.

STUDENT #2. I know what that's like.

MARCUS. You do? Um, thank you.

STUDENT #1. Bastards!

MARCUS. You really wanna hear this?

DHH. Trust me, they do.

MARCUS. See, the other kids all knew the truth about me. So on the outside, I was trying to fit in with everyone else, but inside, um...

STUDENT #2. You knew they were lookin' down on you!

MARCUS. That's right! God, this is so weird. I've never even... and in public like this...

STUDENT #2. Marcus, we've all been oppressed! [...] Doesn't that feel good,

Marcus?

MARCUS. It really does! God, this is amazing, you guys don't even know me – and to welcome me like this into your club -

DHH. Community.

MARCUS. Community. I feel like I've finally found – a home -

STUDENT #2. We love you, brother!

MARCUS. Do you know how special this is? Out there—in the rest of America—everyone's on their own, fighting to stay afloat. But *you* – you've got each other.

No, *we* 've got each other!

STUDENT #4. Marcus Gee, you are a role model for us all!⁴³

This exchange between the Asian American students and Marcus is interesting because the language used leaves room for different interpretations. Marcus speaks as himself and of his experiences growing up as the poor white kid in a richer neighbourhood, but the language of exclusion in this case is broad enough to be also applicable to the experiences of the Asian American students. The students who hear his story subsume his narration into their own understanding, partly because they believe that he also is Asian American, thus his narration has a place amongst their own.

David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* inspires people to examine how race can be a presentation of self and forces us to question how much of our racial selves is a performance. DHH even goes so far as to question the validity of race as an identity marker. It's a difficult question to ask and answer, but in the context of this thesis, I would state that the Asian-as-abject problem stems from an overemphasis of race as an

⁴³ Ibid., 31-2.

identity marker in America, to the detriment of the discussions about race. In this sense, race as a marker of identity has less validity than ever before, because it is the unmoving standard by which sociocultural statuses are maintained. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng states that “racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others.”⁴⁴ This racialisation can be seen in both *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face*, as the “actual” Asians are juxtaposed with white characters in yellowface, in order to mark their real racial identities. Bun Foo, Ching Ho and DHH occupy the roles of the perpetual outsiders, even as their presence is vital to the plots. In these cases, the sustained “exclusion-yet-retention” of Asian Americans renders the Asian American as perpetually abject—the metaphorical dead end. One of the problems persistently faced by some Asian American academics who write about identity politics is the impossibility of breaking through this state of perpetual abjection, and of honouring the history of the racial oppression of Asian Americans that formed the basis of Asian American identity, without erasing it. Cheng succinctly explains this internal conflict:

Precisely because the American history of exclusion, imperialism, and colonization runs so antithetical to the equally and particularly American narrative of liberty and individualism, cultural memory in America poses a continuously vexing problem: How does the nation “go on” while remembering those transgressions? How does it *sustain* the remnants of denigration and disgust

⁴⁴ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10.

created in the name of progress and the formation of an American identity?⁴⁵

She goes on to describe the ways in which both liberal and racist whites actively participate in “an elaborate identificatory system based on psychical and social consumption-and-denial, [...] albeit out of different motivations. The racists need to develop elaborate ideologies in order to accommodate their actions with official American ideals, while white liberals need to keep burying the racial other in order to memorialize them.”⁴⁶ Although identity politics are not exclusively American, it is the particular instances of the foundation of the American nation that make issues regarding American racial identity exceptionally difficult to overcome or circumnavigate. Cheng points out that the academic studies regarding aspects of identity are, in themselves, problematic. “While much critical energy has been directed towards deconstructing categories such as gender and race, less attention has been given to the ways in which individuals and communities remain invested in maintaining such categories, even when such identities prove to be prohibitive or debilitating. The rhetoric of progress or cure can produce its own blind spots.”⁴⁷

As I have suggested at the start of this thesis, I believe the answer to this may lie in the reproduction of such categories in a transcultural setting, so that scholars may see what is hidden in the blind spots. The Hong Kong productions of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face* are promising case studies for this. This is not to suggest that the transplantation and mimicry of these shows in Hong Kong is without its own complications. Hong Kong is by no means a tabula rasa. In the following section, I

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

provide the reader with a brief history of the civil rights movement in Hong Kong in the 1960s, which marked the start of greater equality between the then-British colonials and the Hong Kong people, and was the catalyst for all parties to address the issues of social inequality in the territory. Such social inequalities were reflected in the colonial government's stance on English language education and English language theatre, the accessibility to which was a marker of class and race distinction. The 1967 riots brought about improvements in social welfare which included the establishment of cultural institutions, such as theatre, for the general public. This in turn allowed the English language theatre tradition in Hong Kong to continue today, where productions such as *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face* take place. There are many parallels between the American civil rights movement and the Hong Kong civil rights movements, parallels which I believe are useful in the examination of the politics of re/presentation found in both shows as they are performed in Hong Kong.

White Pigs and Yellow Dogs: Colonial and Racial Tensions in Hong Kong in the 1960s

1966 and 1967 were years of discontent, violence and upheaval in Hong Kong's colonial history. This discontent was a catalyst to major social reform under British colonial rule. The eruption of social discontent into violence forced the colonial government to improve social welfare and relations with the Hong Kong people. To this day, however, there is limited English language literature about the 1967 riots in Hong Kong, and this chapter of Hong Kong history is largely ignored in schools and the media. Gary Ka-wai Cheung, the author of one of the first English books about the riots, states in

his preface that 1967 was like a “vacuum in Hong Kong history.”⁴⁸ Cheung contends that the reasons for this historical vacuum are political—in return for forgetfulness, “Beijing reached a settle-no-old-scores agreement with Britain when the two countries were hammering out the terms of the Joint Declaration,”⁴⁹ a founding document which contains the principles of “one country, two systems” that has helped determine aspects of law and society in postcolonial Hong Kong. The current government of China unofficially cites social harmony as another reason why the 1967 riots should be forgotten. “The 1967 incident is part of history, and attempts to settle old scores are not conducive to harmony and unity in Hong Kong.”⁵⁰ The leftist- and communist-fueled protests, police beatings, arson and bomb attacks and related deaths of fifty-one people in 1967 were certainly anything but harmonious.

Academic and official historical documentation of the racial tensions and prejudices between British colonials and local Hong Kong Chinese is scarce in comparison to the attention such civil rights and race issues have received in America. The 1967 riots, although initially stemming from a labour dispute, have undeniable racial undertones. The working class in Hong Kong were local Chinese, while members of the ruling class were often white British colonials, assigned from overseas to live and work in the colony. The riots of 1966-67 were a cumulative venting of unexpressed tensions within society from decades of colonial rule. Traditionally, class divisions in Hong Kong have been along racial lines, because of the territory’s colonial history. David Harvey, an expatriate who grew up in Hong Kong, worked as a journalist during the 1967 riots.

⁴⁸ Gary Ka-wai Cheung, preface to *Hong Kong’s Watershed: The 1967 Riots* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), vii.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 7.

The Chinese Communist propaganda of the times referred to all of the Europeans as “white-skinned pigs” and the Chinese police who assisted us were labelled, “yellow running dogs.” A friend in the Hong Kong Police told me years later that they had a special “club tie” created for police and army personnel who took part in the 1967 “disturbances.” The striped tie, of the regimental or old school type, is covered with little white pigs and yellow dogs.⁵¹

This was a clear reference to the races of the people involved.

The editorial in the leftist newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* on May 7, 1967 “reminded those policemen who ‘beat the Chinese compatriots with their batons’ that it was disgraceful for them to beat fellow Chinese, and they would certainly come to no good if they did not repent quickly.”⁵² Cheung also documents other instances of racial tensions turned into violence. There was general discontent brewing amongst the poor working masses, stemming from what was seen as oppression by the colonial government, rife corruption and the almost complete lack of social welfare. Earlier, in April of 1966, a man named So Sau-chung staged a then—unprecedented hunger strike against the Star Ferry Company. His actions are somewhat reminiscent of Rosa Parks’s act of defiance in 1955, in that they sparked a chain of events which led to major social reform. In Hong Kong, this reform also included a sudden growth in government spending in the arts and the construction of theatres in various districts around the territory. So was protesting a fare hike, which was approved without consideration for the working-class, who were

⁵¹ David Harvey, “Britain’s Small Wars”, last accessed February 11, 2012, <http://britains-smallwars.com/RRGP/HongKong.htm>.

⁵² Cheung, *Hong Kong’s Watershed*, 30.

struggling in the wake of an economic recession.⁵³ The fare increase, in addition to other increases in government charges, reflected the ruling body's lack of understanding of working-class needs and a lack of consideration of the general public's opinion. Because Hong Kong was a colony, "government" was synonymous with "expatriate" or "British," i.e. white. To be white signified that one was in the upper echelons—that one was rich, educated and by extension, an oppressor or a colonialist. There were rich and educated Chinese, but they were smaller in number and considered as fitting in with the British colonials due to their wealth and social status. Such strong colonial overtones did not only affect the local Chinese people in material ways, it also seemed to foster a sense of societal malaise. So's protest triggered a series of riots between police, Gurkhas and supporters of So between April 4 and April 8, resulting in a citywide curfew, the use of teargas and guns, hundreds of arrests and one related death.⁵⁴ *The Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Kowloon Disturbances 1966*, an investigation into the cause of the 1966 "disturbance," stated that "considerable emphasis was laid by some witnesses on the effects of *a feeling in Hong Kong of impermanence, of a lack of belonging* and of elements of misunderstanding between government and people" (emphasis added).⁵⁵ No doubt this sense of displacement was triggered by a lack of autonomy, as well as reflecting the silence of the "other." This sense of impermanence was undoubtedly strengthened by the marked institutional and social segregation between the colonials and the local Chinese population, which was delineated by race as well as class. Two such areas in which this segregation was seen were in the accessibility of English language

⁵³ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 12.

education and of theatrical entertainment for the Hong Kong Chinese populace. In the next section, I outline the colonial history of English language amateur theatre in Hong Kong, and how western forms of cultural entertainment were (and still are) used as a commodity to promote Hong Kong's status as an international city. I also discuss how the colonial government sustained the social segregation between the British colonials and the working-class Hong Kong people through the control of access to English language education, which in turn reinforced the exclusivity of western theatre for colonial consumption.

“No Racial Bar:” English Language Theatre and Education in Hong Kong

Rozanna Lilley's book, *Staging Hong Kong*, published in 1998, provides an in-depth and comprehensive look at the theatre scene in Hong Kong from the 1970s, when the colonial British government was first pressured to create and fund a better art scene. Theatre at that time consisted of two widely varying poles: English language theatre for the white colonial community and the ethnically Chinese English-language-educated elite, which exclusively produced a traditional repertoire popular with the expatriate community, and Cantonese opera for the local Chinese, non-English speaking public. The move to make the performing arts more inclusive was a response in part to the social upheaval of the mid-1960s (as discussed in the previous section) which kick-started multiple efforts by the government to improve the overall welfare of the Hong Kong people. However, the way in which the colonial government decided to promote culture and performing arts was with a decidedly imperialistic attitude. Lilley writes, “Justification for arts funding and for middle class and elite appropriation of cultural

goods is derived from a representation of Hong Kong society as only ‘semi-civilised,’ defined primarily in terms of its economic prosperity, versus its potential for genuine civilization, known through the aesthetic education imparted by the performing arts.”⁵⁶ Art and culture served only as an indicator of (western) civilisation, thus it was important to bring “civilising” art to the masses in the form of ballets, orchestras, operas and western fine art, regardless of the interests of the local people. Of course, this imparting of culture flowed in one direction only. “The insipid argument remains one of rightful access to civilising practices, of shared participation in an uplifting aesthetic,” writes Lilley, rather contemptuously. “This proselytising condescension finds no counterpart. The opacity and unavailability of Chinese performing arts to Western audiences is carefully elided.”⁵⁷ This was a move by the colonial government to promote Hong Kong as a more civilised—or, more “westernised”—place, although Lilley points out that the actual funding spent was not a huge sum, nor a priority with the Hong Kong government.⁵⁸ To paraphrase Lilley, it was important to promote Hong Kong as something more than a “cultural desert,” for fear that “qualified expatriates” would find nothing much to do except go to the cinema or hike up the mountains, as this would severely affect these expatriates’ desire to settle in the territory. Lilley goes on to point out that “these ‘outsiders’ [...] tend to be politically conservative white males with managerial careers and dependent wives.”⁵⁹

In Hong Kong today, the government still uses the same rhetoric when it expresses concern for Hong Kong's lack of attractiveness to highly qualified, expatriate

⁵⁶ Lilley, *Staging Hong Kong*, 54.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 54-5.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 74.

professionals and tourists alike. Since the 1997 handover to Chinese rule, there are still a small number of expatriates and their families living and working in Hong Kong, who often form the audience at English language theatre productions. Lilley states that “performing arts in Hong Kong has a well-established, steady but relatively small middle-class audience,”⁶⁰ but that the tickets to shows, especially the large international artists who tour to the territory are “beyond the reach of most locals,”⁶¹ although this appears to be changing in recent years with the increase in social upward mobility. It is useful here to point out that the term “locals” is usually used to describe home-grown Chinese who are less likely to have good English skills. Clearly, then, there was (and is) a chasm between the haves and have-nots in terms of the accessibility to the theatre, which in turn affects the shows that are produced or brought to the territory, whilst also being reflective of the kind of one-sided investment of the Hong Kong government in its attempt to appear multicultural to the “right” people. “These civilising practices are mainly designed to meet the requirements of expatriates and the local elite,” writes Lilley. “Of course, the nexus between ‘high art’ and capitalism has been argued elsewhere but what is surprising about Hong Kong is the sheer blatancy of the connection in public discourse.”⁶² This governmental and institutional enforcement of this idea is not only limited to the performing arts, and continues today. In May 2014, the Hong Kong branch of the Asia Society, an American-founded educational organization, announced a private donation of HK\$100 million (US\$12.9 million) from the British-born founder of Duty-Free Shopping, Robert W. Miller. This donation will go towards providing “an

⁶⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁶¹ Ibid., 58.

⁶² Ibid., 84-5.

unprecedented opportunity for local talent to have a platform to hone their skillset and collaborate with international artists, and ultimately reinforce Hong Kong's position as a work-renowned [sic] creative hub.”⁶³ The philanthropy of Miller is an attempt to address the “need for Hong Kong artists to be exposed to international ideas and artistic best practices,”⁶⁴ which hints at a supposed cultural deficiency in comparison to the rest of the world, as perceived by a western philanthropist and an American educational organisation. In this environment where capitalism and art are closely entwined, government funding is not necessarily indicative of the intrinsic cultural worth of any performing arts company, but is rather a strategic investment to ensure that the city *appears* to its best competitive advantage in the international community. It is therefore in the Hong Kong government's interests to fund certain performing arts genres and high profile theatre companies that will appear to benefit the local community on the widest scale, and in the process, be seen as maintaining local cultural heritage. As English speakers are outnumbered by Cantonese speakers, it makes economic sense that a larger proportion of the funding should go to Chinese theatre companies.

The two English language amateur theatre companies that produced the shows I write of in this thesis do not currently receive funding from the Hong Kong government, but have strong ties to colonial Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Singers, the group responsible for the 2009 production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, is one of the longest running English language amateur theatre groups in Hong Kong. Other prominent groups with a colonial link include the Hong Kong Players and the American Community

⁶³ S. Alice Mong, “Robert W. Miller Makes Major Donation: HK\$100M to Promote Hong Kong's Emerging Talent,” Asia Society Hong Kong press release, May 9, 2014, <http://asiasociety.org/hong-kong/robert-w-miller-makes-major-donation>.

⁶⁴ Robert W. Miller, *Ibid*.

Theatre. Records and archives are not exact, but the earliest record of the establishment of an English-speaking amateur theatre company is of the Hong Kong Amateur Dramatic Society in 1844, roughly two years after the founding of Hong Kong as a British colony on August 29, 1842. This group changed its name to the Hong Kong Stage Club in 1946, and in 1991 merged with Garrison Players to become the Hong Kong Players. Today, the Hong Kong Players produce mostly dramas and the annual Christmas pantomime, averaging three to four productions a year. They also claim to be “longest running community theatre group in Hong Kong,” despite the various names and incarnations.⁶⁵ The other show discussed in this thesis, 2012’s *Yellow Face*, was produced by the Hong Kong Players. Interestingly, the somewhat sister theatre company, the Hong Kong Singers, also claims to be “the longest established theatrical group in Hong Kong.”⁶⁶ The exact date of the founding of the Singers is undetermined, but officially they say it was 1931. The Hong Kong Singers, as the name suggests, exclusively perform productions centred around music. Most of the stage productions have been Broadway and West End musicals, such as *Annie*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Kiss Me, Kate* and other classic musicals, performed on rotation throughout the years. In recent years, The Singers have branched out from the traditional repertoire to include newer musicals such as *The Full Monty* (2007), *I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change* (2011) and *Secrets Every Smart Traveler Should Know* (2012). These three groups are the key players in English language amateur theatre groups in Hong Kong, although there have been an increasing number of smaller theatre groups producing shows in recent years. Although no records

⁶⁵ “Hong Kong Players: Theatre in the Community,” accessed August 4, 2014, <http://www.hongkongplayers.com/about-us/history/>.

⁶⁶ “Hong Kong Singers,” accessed August 4, 2014, <http://hongkongsingers.wordpress.com/about/>.

are kept of the kinds of people who attend these shows, it is usually those who are fluent in English, which often means the expatriate and/or white community.⁶⁷

In the historical cases of the Hong Kong Singers and the Hong Kong Players, who have traditionally catered to colonial and/or expatriate members and audiences, any productions with a racial undertone where Chinese or Asians were presented in a negative light would likely not have been viewed by the very same minority that that production stereotyped. The Hong Kong Singers's 1959 production of *The Mikado*, for example, would likely not have had a large local Chinese attendance. There is no way to find out the typical demographic of the audience members in the Hong Kong Singers' shows in the 1960s, or any other past show, as no records have ever been made. However, a cursory glance at the show titles produced by the theatre company throughout the decades hints at a very particular class of audience—English-speaking, white and privileged, although this is becoming much less so in recent years. The audience members attending these shows were most likely already knowledgeable of their content and the songs. The Singers have put on *The Mikado* six times since 1959 (in 1959, 1965, 1973, 1981, 1988 and alarmingly recently in 1995); *Chu Chin Chow* in 1962; *Anything Goes* in 1999 and 2008; and of course, the 2009 production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

The Mikado, an operetta, remains a highly controversial show, as it is traditionally performed by white actors in yellowface.⁶⁸ *Chu Chin Chow*, though less well known than *The Mikado*, is an *Arabian Nights*-inspired story about a Robber Chieftain named Abu

⁶⁷ For an in-depth look at the historical and post-handover English language theatre in Hong Kong, of both amateur and professional levels, please refer to Mike Ingham, "Hong Kong-based English-language Theatre," in *City Stage: Hong Kong Playwriting in English*, ed. Mike Ingham, Xu Xi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 1-10.

⁶⁸ For an in-depth discussion on *The Mikado*, please refer to Josephine D. Lee, *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

Hasan who disguises himself as the Chinese merchant Chu Chin Chow in order to infiltrate the palace of the man he is trying to rob. This role would entail an (inevitably white) actor masquerading as an Arab who disguises himself as a Chinese man. In *Anything Goes*, the characters of Luke and John (named Ching and Ling prior to the 1987 Broadway revival) are stock characters—two Chinese cue-wearing men who have been converted to Christianity. Mrs. Meers in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* is, by plot necessity, a white actress who uses yellowface to “fool” the other characters on stage as to her true intentions. Racially sensitive these shows are not, but racial sensitivity was probably not a consideration in these choices. To this day, the Hong Kong Singers decide by a member-elected committee vote which shows to produce. The members consist of any person who is interested in participating in the shows and who pays a small annual fee in order to do so. Although there is an open-door policy, the kinds of people who usually become members are expatriates or people with a near-native command of the English language, whose western education has already supplied them with the skills and interest in acting or stage technology. The positions within the committee are filled by member vote at the annual general meetings. Shows are proposed by a potential director/producer team. Factors that influence the choice of show include the economic viability of the show (in terms of how much the rights cost, the production budget, as well as the likelihood of it selling well), how well known the show is, and the group’s canon (i.e. the shows that have been in the group’s traditional repertoire). The committee itself is usually made up of expatriates. As of this writing, the current committee consists of ten people, four of whom are of Asian descent with mixed backgrounds or dual nationalities, such as a Chinese Canadian who was born in Hong Kong, and a Filipino who grew up in Hong

Kong. The remaining six are white, five of whom are British with the sixth from New Zealand. While this cross-section is perhaps to be expected from an amateur English language theatre group in Hong Kong, it is interesting to note that the role of chairman at the Hong Kong Singers has always been someone white/British.

English language theatre during colonial days in Hong Kong was an example of double exclusion. The minority that was stereotyped on stage was also excluded from the Performance via a series of economic and language factors. A working class individual would not have been able to afford a theatre ticket, and would not have sufficient command of the English language to comprehend the production. This kind of colonial elitism extended to education. The reluctance of the colonial government to educate local Chinese people in English language skills was another instance of white repression and echoes strongly of exclusionary acts formed in America during pre-civil rights days as ways to repress African American and other racial minorities. In Hong Kong, nine-year compulsory, government funded education was only introduced in 1978, but schools were, for all intents and purposes, divided into schools for expatriate children and for local Chinese children. The Education Policy of 1965 addressed apparent “widespread misinformation” about the English schools.

At this point, in view of what would appear to be widespread misinformation about the English schools, we wish to stress that there is no racial bar to admission to these schools which are open to all children with a sufficient command of the English language to profit from the education provided and

which are the most truly international schools in Hong Kong.⁶⁹

However democratic the Education Bureau wished to portray the schooling system in Hong Kong, they also—perhaps contrarily—pointed out a clear difference between the needs of expatriate children and local children.

We agree that the general system of education provided for Chinese-speaking children does not meet the special requirements of overseas parents. In the special circumstances of Hong Kong, where the majority of overseas parents are British and where many other overseas parents appear satisfied with the British system of education, we agree that education provided for English-speaking children should be similar in content and method to that available in state schools in Britain.⁷⁰

The paper goes on to list some recommendations for the English speaking schools, to justify their higher running costs. It concludes by stating that the recommendations

refer to the features of the schools for English-speaking children which set them apart from the schools provided for Chinese-speaking children, and make the per capita recurrent cost higher than the per capita recurrent cost of schools provided for Chinese-speaking children. These features are mainly the size of classes, and the employment of overseas teaching staff.⁷¹

An official mention of “widespread misinformation” would seem to suggest that the white paper was trying to address a popular belief that the schooling system was biased in favour of expatriate children. The arguments included within were made completely seriously—the circularity of such contradictory logic elicited no sense of irony at all. It

⁶⁹ Hong Kong British Colonial Government, Education Bureau, *Education Policy, April 1965* (Java Road, Hong Kong: Government Press, 1965), 26.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

seemed that a local Chinese child could only benefit from a good English language education if they already possessed a “sufficient command of the English language” — but how was a student to learn the “sufficient” level of English without native language instructors? The paper makes it clear that there was no *racial* discrimination, but undeniably there was one of class. As those of the rich, ruling class were mostly white expatriates, the difference between discrimination by race or by class was negligible. Nobody who could read the Education Policy (written in English) was likely to criticise it or challenge its argument for more funding for the English-speaking schools, as they were precisely the socioeconomic group who would benefit from such an arrangement. The rhetoric and institutionalisation of discrimination in colonial Hong Kong is strongly reminiscent of that found in the United States.

English is taught today in local schools in Hong Kong; however, there are persistent criticisms that Hong Kong locals cannot speak English well.⁷² The government routinely run campaigns to encourage better English standards in the workplace⁷³ and in schools. The new Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE), introduced in Hong Kong in 2012, includes sections on Reading, Writing, Listening & Integrated Skills, and Speaking in the English Language examinations. Literature in English is an elective subject, and one

⁷² Arguments have been made by linguists that ‘Hong Kong English’ deserves its own recognition and acceptance. Kingsley Bolton and David C.S. Li have discussed the language changes that have occurred in Hong Kong post-1997; they discuss ideas of linguistic imperialism and the “monolingual myth” which exists in Hong Kong. Please refer to Kingsley Bolton, “The Sociolinguistics of Hong Kong and the Space for Hong Kong English,” *World Englishes*, 19, (2000), 265–285; and David C.S. Li, “The Functions and Status of English in Hong Kong: A Post-1997 Update,” *English World-Wide*, Volume 20, Number 1 (1999), 67–110.

⁷³ The Workplace English Campaign was started by the Hong Kong Government in 2000. For more information, please access the website. The Workplace English Campaign, accessed August 4, 2014, http://www.english.gov.hk/eng/html/wec_overview.htm.

novel, one play, one film, short stories and poems are studied within this elective.⁷⁴

Theatre activities are considered an unimportant part of education and are mostly covered by extra-curricular programs, which few parents allow their children to take part in because of a persistent belief in its lack of practical application. Drama is now being used as a format to teach the English language and this service is offered by independent contractors outside the schools. Even so, the emphasis remains on using drama to teach language skills, not on drama itself. Given this general lack of education about western theatre, there is also a concurrent lack of interest amongst the local Chinese majority in English language theatrical arts in Hong Kong. Today, anyone can buy a ticket to see an English drama, but there is usually little inclination for someone with low English language ability and little prior exposure to the theatre to do so. Cantonese language theatre, often including adaptations of English language shows, is greatly preferred by the general public. English language amateur theatre remains mostly the realm of expats and westernised Chinese, from production to consumption. This is an extension of the double exclusion I mentioned previously. This matters because as long as instances of yellowfacing occur on the English language stage, the representation remains in the hands of the dominant white (post)colonials and will reinforce (yet again) the perpetuality of the Asian (American) as abject.

The examples I have discussed so far in this thesis mark a timeline upon which transitions and changes are slowly taking place. Krystyn Moon traces this kind of racism/elitism vis-à-vis theatre back to the end of the eighteenth century, when “many European and American writers, realizing that what they saw as the ‘laws’ of music and

⁷⁴ Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, accessed August 4, 2014, http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/hkdse/assessment/subject_information/.

drama were not the same throughout the world, began systematically to marginalize non-Western traditions. [...] Stereotypes circulated by the majority of American and European writers about China's inferior culture led many to conclude that the Chinese were incapable of understanding or producing something that Westerners perceived to be more sophisticated—Western music and theater. Racial inferiority, supported by popular beliefs and a growing scientific literature, was manifested in culture—both in the making of certain types of productions and in the doubts pertaining to the level of Chinese comprehension.”⁷⁵ These beliefs no doubt influenced the making of theatrical productions in the chinoiserie and japoneseque styles, and were examples of the dominant white culture subsuming and then reproducing Asian cultures—Orientalism at its best. The views and voices of the dominant group were present at each of Schechner's levels of performance, from the writing of the Drama, to its interpretation by white directors, to the Performance, where all participants onstage and in the audience belonged to the dominant group.

In the case of the *Thoroughly Modern Millie* film, the inclusion of Jack Soo and Pat Morita in the roles of “Oriental No.1” and “Oriental No. 2” marked a shift in the traditions of yellowfacing to include Asians in the Performance, but still, their representation was not to be their own. The adapted stage version of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* was an attempt by (white) writers to update a dated story containing yellowface to make it contemporary, yet the result complicated the racial representation by reproducing the white/other dynamic and showing yet again the perpetually abjected position of the Asian American. As an Asian American playwright, David Henry Hwang participated in

⁷⁵ Krysten Rozalia Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s*. (PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 2005), 5.

the Performance by writing another Drama, thus (re)claiming the process at its inception. He posited the idea that yellowfacing is not necessarily something only performed by the white body but that it can be performed by the Asian body as well, and that the presentation of one's race (and one's face) is something that is universal. It is with this in mind that I present the interviews of my three subjects, who have, in their own way, reclaimed the performance of race in theatre, as a process through which they can explore their own identity and give voice to their opinions.

Staging the Asian American in Hong Kong: Three Case Studies

Up to this point, I have discussed the themes of yellowfacing and the performance of the Asian American identity through performance theory, literary analysis and situating these case studies in the transcultural, sociocultural environment of Hong Kong. The following section is comprised of three of five interviews I conducted between 2010 and 2012 with various people involved in the Hong Kong stagings of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face*.⁷⁶ The first interview is with Janice Jensen, the white actress who played Mrs. Meers in the Hong Kong amateur production in 2009. The second interview is with Eric Ng, an Asian American director living in Hong Kong, who had objected to the production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and who would later go on to direct *Yellow Face* in 2012. The third interview is with Alan Wong, a Eurasian actor from Los Angeles who played the role of Marcus Gee in *Yellow Face* in Hong Kong in 2012. These interviews provide an ethnographic study of the topic at hand.

⁷⁶ The other two interviews that are not used in the main body of this thesis are with Keon Lee, lead actor in *Yellow Face* who played the role of DHH; and a group interview with the ensemble cast of *Yellow Face*. Full transcripts of those interviews can be found in Appendices D and E, pages 135 and 142, respectively.

For the purposes of this thesis, I've chosen to focus on these three individuals for the following reasons. Firstly, all three subjects are/were American, and had the experience of growing up stateside before relocating to Hong Kong. They have all lived in Hong Kong long enough to get the sense of life as an expatriate in the territory. Secondly (and perhaps more importantly), the experiences of these three actors correspond thematically—both Janice and Alan played white characters who “passed” as Chinese/Asian American in their respective shows, and Eric was motivated by the production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* to direct and perform in *Yellow Face*. Eric's passive participation as an audience member in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, which he then used as impetus to produce a response in the form of another show, adds an interesting and provocative element to this case study. I chose to present their interviews here as partial oral histories interspersed with my own reflections and analysis in between each interview. I have chosen this unorthodox way of melding narratives in order to remain concise yet provide adequate context for the reader. I wanted to preserve, as much as possible, their thought processes as we discussed how these shows and roles influenced and affected their sense of identity. I also feel it is necessary to express my own interpretation of the interview, as it then affected the kinds of questions I would ask in the next interview. In the case of Alan and Eric, whose fictional and artistic roles in *Yellow Face* reflected so much of their personal experiences, their interviews are especially important to preserve as a whole, out of respect for the way in which they wanted to construct their own dialogue about the topic of their personal identities.

To begin with, an introductory framework is necessary for the reader to situate these interviews within the larger structure of this thesis. I ordered the interviews by a

sequence that reflects the historical and thematic progression of yellowfacing.

Thoroughly Modern Millie, although re-written to suit a politically correct, modern audience, still retains the deeply entrenched, systematic abjection of the Asian American as framed by white representation, albeit in a new way. My literary analysis of the Drama expounded these points, and the interview with Janice, a socially aware, white (ex-) American provided the point of view of a transculturally-minded actress. Her perspective as a long-time expatriate, and particularly as a renunciated American, is well suited to the transcultural theme of this thesis. I wanted to know why she chose to play the role of Mrs. Meers, and how she had struggled in her portrayal of a racist character. She is the white voice in this study, but she also spoke as a performer and as a Hong Kong permanent resident.

My second interviewee, Eric, saw Janice perform as Mrs. Meers in the Hong Kong production, and his recollection of the production showed a very different, visceral response in comparison to the relative indifference expressed by other, non-Asian American audience members. His decision to direct *Yellow Face* was also particularly interesting as an example of how a transcultural stage in Hong Kong can be used as a place for the abjected Asian American to respond to the kind of abjection ingrained in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. I particularly wished to document how he transitioned between being a passive Asian American spectator to an active contributor to another theatre production about race. Finally, Alan's experience playing the role of a white-mistaken-as-Asian made him a strong voice to juxtapose against Janice's, as both of their characters share much in common in terms of their racial fluidity, but are portrayed in very different ways and thus function to distort the traditional stereotype to various ends.

His experiences as a Eurasian-American also allow him a unique perspective at the transcultural scale.

Janice Jensen / actress / Mrs. Meers

Janice Jensen is the white actress who played Mrs. Meers in the 2009 Hong Kong amateur version of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. I interviewed her in November 2011, almost two years after the production.⁷⁷ She was born in New Jersey and lived there until she was in her mid-twenties, when she moved to Florida. When questioned about her nationality, Janice stated that “I was born an American, I was an American citizen up until [2010]. I chose, as did my husband, to give up our U.S. citizenship. We have enjoyed living in Hong Kong so very much and do not see any benefit to holding a U.S. passport and quite a benefit to giving it up.” She currently holds permanent residency in Hong Kong, a citizenship from an island in the Caribbean, and as of this writing, is residing between the Caribbean and the United States. “Our identity does not change. We were born Americans.” She now identifies as someone “originally from the U.S., but [...] now from Hong Kong.” She has been acting since she was in her early teens, and her roles “in the beginning were—and from the beginning—have been fairly crazy, brass [roles...] usually bigger than life,” such as Connie in *Come Blow My Horn* and Gertie Cummings in *Oklahoma!* Some other roles she has played in her time in Hong Kong include Mrs. Pugh in *Annie*, The Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, Vicki Nichols in *The Full Monty*, and Sister Robert Anne in *Nunsense*. She had very minimal formal training as an actress until she went to college, when she went to the then-named William Paterson

⁷⁷ All of the following quotes are taken from my interview with Janice. The full interview can be found in Appendix B, page 105.

College of New Jersey (now William Paterson University), majoring in Interpersonal Communications with a minor in Theatre.

Janice emphasised that throughout her life, she has been motivated to choose her roles by how much she thinks that she will enjoy performing them, and Mrs. Meers was no exception. “She is supposed to be a New York woman, supposedly Hong Kong Chinese—how fun would this be?” She has always been attracted to evil characters, as it is a challenge for her to be someone she would never be in real life. “I *like* it! It is something that, like I was saying before, is bigger than life. I cannot be evil and loud and *angry* in real life. Well, when I’m driving, yeah, but nobody can hear me! On stage, I can be. [...] If I had to be *truly* mean mean, I don’t know if I could do that either. These are truly character roles. I love them and I love doing them well. [...] I feel uncomfortable being cute. That I don’t know how to do.”

I asked Janice how she would describe Mrs. Meers “Oh my God, she was a *racist*, she was a bigot, she was—you know—she was a *slave driver*, she was taking people from their homes and threatening people who worked for her that they would never see their mother again, she was wrecking families and wrecking homes and did this on purpose every day, *just* to make a buck, because she was unhappy with *her* life. This was a horrible, *horrible* person! [...] She was stupid, thoughtless, rude, self-centred and just *plain mean*. [...] She was bothered by everything. Everything and everyone was beneath her, it was everybody’s fault that she was in the position she was in, she took *no* responsibility for herself. [...] But, okay, there was some irony in it. Look at where we’re about to do it—we’re about to do it in Hong Kong, and the two Chinese boys who are working for me are from Hong Kong and they’re trying to get their mother to the United

States from Hong Kong.”

Janice was forty-one years old at the time of her performance as Mrs. Meers. When I asked her what she first thought of playing the character, she said, “I was nervous... because I realised that she was opposite of anything that I would *ever* be, and I had to be that, and that much more, because it was staged. I remember when I had to start using my Chinglish accent, my greatest fear was that I was going to walk out of the theatre and there was going to be a lynch mob waiting for me—that I had disrespected and just been *horrible* to the people that I love. Yes, it’s a show, but sometimes people take these things very seriously. I was concerned about that. So it was even more important to me to make her bigger than life and more of a *character* than a real person. I didn’t want anyone to believe that this could be a real person, but that she was just funny, and ridiculous, and unbelievable as somebody who would really do that—but be completely believable as a character. So it was a challenge.” Janice hoped that it would be clear through her portrayal of Mrs. Meers that this was a caricature and not someone to be taken seriously. “I truly hoped that the way I had developed the character would convey to people that she was really an idiot.”

Janice sometimes spoke in her Chinglish accent as a joke in her daily life, and to communicate with her local Hong Kong Chinese students, but “it is *always* done with the love and care and the respect that I feel for the people that I love and have become part of my family. Like I said, Hong Kong is my home. But there is a definite Chinglish that exists and it’s not a bad thing, and I can’t look at it as a bad thing—I find it very endearing.” Her own lack of Chinese skills was sometimes a cause for embarrassment, “but as Mrs. Meers, I had none of that. I was confident bastardising the Chinglish

Chinese American as brutally as I possibly could—that's how I was.” Still, she is aware of the fact that the use of English in Hong Kong makes life easier for expatriates such as herself. “I am very grateful that there is as much English spoken here [in Hong Kong] as there is, because it makes Americans like me integrate a lot more quickly.”

We spoke briefly about the *Thoroughly Modern Millie* film and her opinions on Beatrice Lillie's version of Mrs. Meers. “After I did the show, I saw the movie. It was totally different. 100 percent different. I'm so glad I didn't watch the movie [before performing in the show]. She was almost a non-character. She was this quiet, sullen, grumpy woman who didn't really have an accent—who just kinda flipped everybody off and the scariest thing about her was her little squeaky cart that she would push around. That wouldn't have worked for me. I would have never taken the role had it been that.” When we discussed the possibility of some people misinterpreting her performance for something offensive, she responded that “you're not going to get through to everybody. You're not going to convey the message to everybody. It's not just Mrs. Meers. It could have been the Wicked Witch. It could have been *Oklahoma!* It could have been a local Chinese show. It doesn't matter. People's perceptions are going to be different. So, it was a fun musical. In the end, she was arrested. Mom came back, so the people I had been so horrible to did get reunited with their mother. It was a good thing. I hoped for the best. No one said anything negative to me. Now, maybe they didn't like it and they didn't say anything at all, so I don't know about that. [...] Then there were people who complimented me on the character. That was great. You can't please all the people all the time. It was never meant to be offensive, and it was meant to show that stupid people are just stupid, and in the end, they get what's coming to them. That's wonderful. And who

was the one who saved the day? Bun Foo and Ching Ho! That's the *best* part! Put the stupid western woman back in her place where she belongs. I'm okay with that. [...]

People are trying to entertain for something good. If you don't want the entertainment, or you don't want to hear a possible lesson, then don't go. It's okay. We're not here to make a movement and start an uprising—okay, western women, you're going to start dressing up as Chinese women and you're going to start rounding up a bunch-a local Hong Kong people and you're gonna steal and... it's *ridiculous*. But that's the thing—it was ridiculous and we wanted to show people how people how fun and ridiculous it could be. [...] When Bun Foo and Ching Ho come out and do their song—that was *amazing*. I remember them coming back and saying, 'They really like us, this is real!' They were *so* excited. I said, 'You guys thought I would be the star. *You're* the stars! I'm just the old lady, they want me to go away.' It was *great*. It actually put everybody else in a better light. They were better than Mrs. Meers from the word go. That's what people will hopefully take away from that. But everyone has a different... You can have a hundred people read the Bible, and you can get a hundred different opinions of what the Scripture says. No different here."

In my time spent with Janice discussing this topic, I sensed that she was coming from an honest, respectful place, but that she did not feel it was necessary to turn down a role on the basis of its potential offensiveness. Perhaps she sensed that such a performance of race would have a different response with an audience in Hong Kong, whose awareness of and response to the racial stereotype that constructed much of the character of Mrs. Meers would be different from that in some metropolitan areas in the United States. Her decision to play the role was inevitably a mix of personal choice and

her consideration and understanding for the cross-section of society to which she would be performing.

Eric Ng / director / *Yellow Face*

My second interviewee, Eric Ng, was the inadvertent inspiration for this thesis topic. His initial objection to *Thoroughly Modern Millie* was in surprising juxtaposition to the reactions of non-Asian Americans, and this difference was something I wanted to explore further. As an Asian American in Hong Kong, his experiences growing up as a minority in the United States occasionally inspire and motivate his artistic choices in the Hong Kong theatre scene. He was born in 1980 in New York and spent his childhood growing up in New York and Ohio. He moved to Hong Kong when he was thirteen for high school, but went back to the United States to attend Babson College and stayed a few more years to work, finally returning to Hong Kong in 2006. He has a BSc in Business Administration with a concentration in Marketing and Management Information Systems, and a minor in drama. He is now a lawyer. Like Janice, the minor in drama was not planned but came about because he had invested all his electives into indulging his interest in theatre during his time in college. I spoke to him in November 2010, thirteen months after the Hong Kong Singers's production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.⁷⁸ I asked him to explain the reasons behind his objections to the show and how it made him feel. I tried to understand how his objections to yellowfacing stemmed from his personal experiences growing up in the United States, and how that might result in a different racial sensitivity from those born and raised in Hong Kong. We began with his relation of

⁷⁸ The complete interview transcript with Eric can be read in Appendix A, page 90.

the events leading up to the previous year's production.

"I first heard about it through the grapevine that Singers was looking [to do] *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. I'd seen bits of the show and I knew of the original version. It was very strange. I was a little bit bewildered as to why a group like the Singers would choose to do a show like that. Before *Millie*, I'd also had some objections to them doing the show *Anything Goes*.⁷⁹ A good friend of mine who's also Asian American—she's Eurasian, she grew up in California—we went to watch *Anything Goes* and we saw, basically, two Asian actors going on stage in very traditional clothing, in very Charlie Chan—very stereotypical depictions. And these were two people who I know spoke very good English.⁸⁰ They don't have any accent. But you see them on stage and suddenly this *really*, really thick Chinese accent comes out. My friend and I just had our head in our hands. We've both had to deal with the whole stigma of having to be Asian in areas where there aren't a lot [of Asians]."

Eric seemed visibly pained while discussing the performance of Janice, who would pull up the corners of her eyes during the delivery of some of her lines. I asked him if it really bothered him, and he explained his childhood experiences with that kind of taunting based on imagined physical appearances and verbal slurs found in American popular vernacular. "I remember growing up in Ohio in this small town and having to deal with these kids—it was in junior high, these were kids, but—coming up to me and making the chinky eyes, and the 'ah so' comments. I got that a lot. It was weird because up until I was about ten years old, I spoke only English. I didn't know any Cantonese, I didn't know any Chinese. I couldn't quite understand why these kids were doing this. But,

⁷⁹ The Hong Kong Singers produced *Anything Goes* in March 2008.

⁸⁰ Leonard Wong played John, and Tyrone Seto played Luke.

again, they weren't used to seeing Asians, so they would come up and make the jokes and the comments and—again, they're kids, what are you gonna do. At the same time, you did have to fight that.”

“That's why I have this whole aversion to people thinking I have an accent, or that I won't know English. So you see a show like *Anything Goes*, the actors have perfectly good English, and they have absolutely no reason why they *shouldn't* be using that, and they're putting on these really heavy Chinese accents and they're playing the stereotype. I didn't have so much of a problem with it in *Anything Goes*, because everyone [in the show] plays a stereotype. That was fine. Then you hear about a show called *Thoroughly Modern Millie* coming in, that you have—the whole thing is stereotype again, but still—you have the whole yellow devil, yellow peril argument where these two Chinese laundrymen—and of course they're going to have to be laundrymen, aren't they? —that are kidnapping white women to sell to Beijing or Peking. It makes a lot of sense that a lot of the guys who were putting on the show were both British and white, and that they would say, 'I don't see a problem, I don't understand what the deal is.'

“They look at it and they see something funny, because they turn it into a comedy, they turn the whole kidnapping thing into a funny... they're both completely incompetent, completely inept, because they're Asian. [Half laughs] One character is the 1940s Hollywood 'Chinese' person—in other words, a white person in yellowface and eye makeup pretending to be Chinese.

“There's a lot of stereotype, there's a lot of bias, a lot of things that we have to fight to get through. And here we have a show that goes all the way back and plays right to that stereotype. [...] It bothers me because I have that childhood background of people

doing that to me. Suddenly it's being played here for laughs and—it's sort of equivalent to a guy suddenly showing up in blackface, halfway through a show. It was disturbing to me. If you know the shows I do, I do a lot of disturbing stuff, but nothing disturbs me more than what I would see on that stage. It was a very personal thing for me, I think, and that's why, when I objected to the show, I made sure to say that this was my personal background that was objecting to this. So it wasn't like I was staging a boycott or that I was protesting."

We brainstormed a little about why a Hong Kong audience reacts differently to an American one (or perhaps exactly as an unenlightened American audience would), and tried to find out if the minority/majority numbers were a factor, or if it was just a case of the audience's exposure to a very different civil rights social history. Eric pointed out the differences in sheer numbers of people of each race. "The local Chinese in Hong Kong are the majority. They are not accustomed to or used to being the one that is singled out. You can see a show where you have classic white stereotypes and people can laugh because it's the majority. At the end of the day, they're still in the position of power. For those in the minority, it's a lot more galling. The problem is, the local Chinese have never *been* in the minority. Say that the portrayals were not of two Chinese laundrymen but of two Filipino domestic helpers, for example, and you had an audience of Filipinos in there, suddenly I think the reaction would be very different. The local Chinese and the American Chinese seem to have different world views because they've gone through different experiences. Local Hong Kong Chinese have never had to deal with being a minority, have never had to deal with prejudice, have never had to deal with racism because they are the majority.

“I think Hong Kong is [a racist society]. We try not to acknowledge it, but it’s there. You look at the treatment of the Filipinos in Hong Kong—you have domestic helpers in Hong Kong who have been here dozens of years and still can’t get permanent resident status because they’re here as a domestic helper. You look at some of the more wealthy Hong Kong Chinese and how they treat their domestic helpers. Then you have the Nepalese in Hong Kong. I think there was a case last year where a Nepalese guy got shot by a cop in the head, shot stone dead, and there were huge race implications associated with that.⁸¹ It just sort of gets glossed over. People don’t want to think about it. People in Hong Kong just don’t want to think about it. They have to worry about their jobs, getting a pay check, their family—and that’s all they want to worry about. The question of whether there are real issues of racism in Hong Kong is *not* a topic of conversation that people want to get into.

“I think it’s more apparent in the U.S., but I think it’s because the United States had to go through the civil rights movement, they had the issue of slavery... and then the whole concept of America being a melting pot for all these races, so it becomes a case where race issues are more openly talked about than they are in Hong Kong. Again, it’s a question of racial experience, where you have a cultural background or history for Chinese Americans that is different than what you see in Hong Kong or in China. The cultural background for Asian Americans is very specific—people who either immigrated or made the trip to California in the 1800s and became indentured servants for the

⁸¹ On March 17, 2009, a police officer fired two shots at a homeless man who was sleeping on a hillside, killing him. An inquest into his death ruled the shooting as fair. Please refer to “Why Shoot Him?” The Hong Kong Standard, March 18, 2009, http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?pp_cat=30&art_id=79667&sid=23138175&con_type=3&d_str=20090318&sear_year=2009 for more information on the incident.

railroad companies, to build the railroads. Again, there were the internment camps and Yellow Peril—these are all very specific to Asian Americans. It’s actually a topic that I’ve addressed when I’ve done shows.”

Irregardless of the cultural background, though, Eric fell back to referring to his own experiences as the source for his personal discontent with *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and the seeming inevitability of the difference in opinion and reception of the raced performance of Mrs. Meers. “At the end of the day, my experiences are probably not the same experiences that a lot of other people in Hong Kong have. They didn’t have to go through that. The reports I heard were that the show actually did do well—the Chinese people in the audience were laughing. That’s fine, because they don’t have that background, they don’t have that history. Everyone looks at theatre and they see something different. What you see when you see a show may not be what I see when I see a show, and *Millie* was one of those examples. Local Hong Kong people, they saw a comedy, a straight up comedy that they didn’t really have to think much about, but what I saw there was... You get flashbacks to when you were a kid, you get flashbacks to every part you were denied because you were the wrong race, every school that has told you ‘you can play Thuy in *Miss Saigon*.’ It was a very personal thing at the end.

“[Minority] actors, we get to take on roles and be different people, but how many opportunities do we get to portray someone who we actually look right for. We can think of all the musicals that have the stereotypical Asian roles—*Miss Saigon*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *The Mikado*, *Pacific Overtures*... How many opportunities does an Asian American get to actually portray an Asian American—it’s not many.” He expressed concern about the negative implications that such a show as *Thoroughly Modern Millie* in

Hong Kong had upon the casting opportunities of Asian Americans anywhere in the world. “Especially in Hong Kong—‘cause in Hong Kong it’s mostly because we don’t have as much talent as we do in, say, New York—but you get more opportunities here. My opportunities as an actor in Hong Kong have been greater than they were in either Ohio or New York, because it was more a question of what you can do, not a question of your looks, you know? [...] You don’t get those same chances in America. So to have [*Thoroughly Modern Millie*] play right back to stereotype in *Hong Kong*—having a show about two Chinese laundrymen kidnapping white women to sell to Peking—I was concerned, I have to say, I wasn’t *reeeally* feeling that this was a show that is good.”

Eric did eventually end up going to see a performance of the production in question. When I asked him about it, he seemed almost apologetic and ashamed to admit that he had, indeed, attended a performance. He explained why he had decided to see it. “I wanted to confirm... I wanted to see... There was always this hope in the back of my head that, maybe I’m just making too big of a deal about this, maybe it’s not as bad as I think. Everyone else was saying it’s not as bad as I’m making it out to be, so maybe I’ll go out and I’ll see if that’s true. I went and... uh... yeah, it was... it was a little bit painful... ‘Cause it was... You go up there and you see it, and you see all of these people laughing at these jokes, at these portrayals, and you realise that you’ve been fighting your whole life to get away from these portrayals, and at the end of the day, that’s what people want to see. [...] You’re both angry that they’re laughing at something that you actually had to go through. I try not to take myself too seriously. I don’t know how well that works. When there were times when you had to, as a kid, go through those experiences, and to have people laugh at those similar situations later on... it’s hard to take. Especially if you are

someone who... I came to Hong Kong and there was opportunity here and I took it, and I thought I did pretty well, I thought I was starting to make a dent, and then you see stuff like this and it's like, why bother."

Despite conveying this sense of hopelessness and frustration, Eric still firmly believes in the power and importance of theatre as more than a medium of entertainment but as a vessel for social change, or at least, a mirror in which we might see our society's flaws and shortcomings. "Theatre is a chance and an opportunity—because you have someone's attention in a theatre for however long—to make them think. You have a chance to make them feel. It's a question of what message you're sending.

"I always found plays and dramas to be more appealing. [...] Dramas and plays are really where my heart's at. [...] I was always under the impression that, as an actor or a director or a producer, when you're doing live performance or entertainment—as in a play or a drama—it's a very unique style. You have a chance, you have an opportunity, while you have someone in the audience, to affect them. You have two hours, or an hour and a half—or however long you have in front of them—to provoke a reaction from the audience members. It's very different from film where you work very hard to get that one take, get that one shoot down, and it's sort of one-sided. You're throwing all this emotion, all this material, at the camera. Once it's edited and directed and goes through post-production, and all this stuff is done, then it goes out to cinemas. You don't have that luxury in theatre. It's a two-way communication. Anybody who's sat in the audience at a very good show will understand that there is an energy between the audience member and the actor. There's a connection there. It's sort of like—not that I would know—taking drugs. There's a high from being on stage, from getting into the role and *feeling* that

connection and that energy between the audience member and you. It's indescribable and it's addictive. That's why people do it, I think. They get a taste of that, and they want more. [...] film is much more mainstream. Stage and theatre still has something about it that can't be replicated via film."

Eric ran his own theatre company after his return to Hong Kong in 2006, and had hopes for it being a way to reach audiences and make them think about some of the issues close to his heart, and also the issues tackled in the plays he chose to produce. "One of the things that I've always wanted to do when I started Looking Glass [Productions] is that I wanted to make a dent—make an impact—on the people who have seen the shows. There is not a whole lot I can do. I'm not going to be President, I'm not going to be a senator, I'm not going to be someone who makes large sweeping changes to the fabric of our society. You do what you can, and if I can direct a show and I can change the minds of one or two people, I'm happy doing that. Then you realise... I was working at that for two, three years—doing my shows—maybe for a little longer, and you see something like this, and realise that it's going to take a lot of work! [Half laughs] It's a drop in the ocean, really. [...] Again, it's a personal thing. It's why I do shows like *The Laramie Project*, or *The Pillowman*, because I feel like you have the opportunity when you're doing theatre. It's a very unique art form. You have the opportunity and the chance to affect—to *profoundly* affect, maybe—the people who are there to participate and watch. [...] I think very few people these days actually see it as being affective. It can affect people. When you approach theatre, you need to approach it as—yes, you can have fun—but also realise that there is a history, there is a background to what you are doing. I don't think we really pay attention to that here.

“Actually, my worst selling show was *The Laramie Project*, which is one of the shows I was most proud of, because we didn’t try to play for ticket sales. We made the play on the basis that the people who *will* come to see it will be affected by it. If you can do that, then... who cares about the ticket sales, really? At the end of the day, it’s just money.”

Eric was fully aware that his different experiences growing up in the United States made it very difficult for him to view acts of yellowface as just a theatrical form. He did not want to impose his beliefs onto others, but simply wanted to make them see the kind of harm and hurt such acts can cause. Speaking to him made me question where my own sense of discomfort about acts of yellowface originated, but more importantly, it reminded me that while something might not be hurtful to myself, if it is hurtful to someone else, that alone would be enough reason not to perform those acts of racial stereotyping.

Alan Wong / actor / Marcus Gee

In 2012, Eric—partly in response to the Hong Kong Singers production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*—decided to produce David Henry Hwang’s *Yellow Face*. Alan M. Wong, an Asian American recently arrived to Hong Kong, was cast in the role of Marcus G. Dahlman, later known as simply Marcus Gee, the white actor who passes as an Asian American in the play. Alan was twenty-six at the time, and had been in Hong Kong for nine months, having moved from California in order to pursue his career in the entertainment industry. As of this writing, he is currently living in Singapore working as a VJ for MTV Asia, is an actor and also does occasional modeling and live event hosting.

He started acting at the age of six and especially enjoys performing in musical theatre. On March 8, 2012, I interviewed him about his experiences growing up Eurasian American, the differences in the way people respond to him in Hong Kong, and the parallels between him and the role he was playing in *Yellow Face*.⁸²

He related to me his experiences growing up in a multi-ethnic family. “Growing up in the San Jose, in the Bay Area, I had *all* ethnicities around me. [...] I just was really lucky, I think. It’s really rare to grow up in a place where it was colour-blind. [...] Growing up with one parent who’s white and one parent who’s Chinese—or anyone [who has] two parents who are different ethnicities—when you grow up in that situation, you automatically don’t see race the way a child who grows up in a single ethnicity family would. ‘Cause to me, my mom and my dad are my parents. There was *no* difference. Phenotypically, sure, they looked different, but I never saw that growing up. [...] I grew up having two ethnicities around me all the time. [...] I was just a product of those parents. Later on, when you start to realise there was separation, it’s kind of jarring for a lot of kids. Not just for multi-ethnic kids, [but also for] kids who grow up in a situation or community where there wasn’t a lot of separation between ethnicities. The first time you realise there’s animosity between ethnicities, or the first time you realise that there’s differences, or perceived differences, or stereotypes, it’s pretty... it’s pretty jarring, you know? I think it’s interesting, ‘cause some people may grow up having tons of prejudices and I can equally understand how jarring it must be for them to realise that we’re all the same. It’s the same barrier they’re breaking through, they’re just coming from different directions. They grew up thinking that we’re all different—that’s a hard transition to

⁸² The full transcript of the interview with Alan can be found in Appendix C, page 119.

come through, ‘Oh, we’re all the same.’ But from my side, I grew up thinking we’re all the same, it was a hard barrier to break through to realise that people saw us as being different.

“When I was in grade school, I first went to a private school that was very caucasian. My brother and I made up 50 percent of the Asian population at this entire school, [which had students from] kindergarten through eighth grade. I went to this school from kindergarten to second grade. Actually, in those few years, I *definitely* started to realise race, because I started getting called ‘chink.’ My best friend at the time, who was Hispanic—for no reason, I don’t know what it was—started pulling his eyes back typically. That was when I started realising that they were trying to associate me with [a Chinese stereotype]. I didn’t feel like I associated with one [race] or the other. To me I just felt like it was all part of everything. I remember getting ostracized at that school. I didn’t get invited to birthday parties with other friends, and we were made fun of. My dad—God bless my dad—in his most infuriated and trying-to-make-a-point state, he walks in, in the middle of our second grade classroom. My teacher is teaching the kids [and my dad] said, ‘Alan, stand up.’ So I stand up, and he started taking all this [expletive] out of my desk and putting it in my bag. He’s taking my coat off the rack... he’s taking me out of school. I didn’t know, right? And then— [Suppresses laugh] I don’t know if this is an Asian stereotype or not—he pulls out a spray cleaning bottle of some type of cleanser and starts cleaning the desk for them. It opened from the top—he cleaned the bottom, he cleaned the chair [Suppresses more laughter] —and the teacher is sitting there like, ‘What are you doing?’ And he yanks me out of that school [...] because the principals wouldn’t do anything about [the racism they experienced].

“I never got mad about it. I don’t know why. [In college] I started creating my identity a little more, centred around being Asian American.” It was in college where Alan was involved in a production of *The Mikado*, in the role of Poo-Bah. Having a director who was open to suggestions helped Alan come to terms with being in that role. “Feeling like I had a say in where we tiptoed the line made it a safer project for me to be a part of. In the end, I wasn’t offended by it, at all.”

I asked Alan how he identifies himself, and how that identity anchors his place in society. “Basically when people ask me what I am, I tell them I am a complete mix. Something I used to say when I was younger—I don’t know if I still say it—was, ‘I am 100% Chinese and 100% caucasian.’ Mostly ‘cause I got tired of answering the question and that would at least make people stop, right? I still believe that actually. I think it’s not a matter of percentage for me, or a matter of splitting up my identity or splitting up my body, for Godssakes, or splitting up anything about me. It’s not an either/or, and I think that was the thing I fought with most as a kid. [...] I like being able to check multiple boxes—that’s what I would prefer—but for a long time, they did not allow you to check multiple boxes, you could only check the other box if you weren’t these. [Bangs four times on table] What the [expletive] is ‘other?’ That’s not like you, that’s not like them, that not... I’m just... nondescript. If anything, being mixed should allow me to feel *more* descript. Putting me in a nondescript box just sucks. A lot.

“Identity’s a crazy thing. Iris, identity is [expletive] crazy. It can be whatever you want it to be. But then, the whole world sees something else, and it’s like—I’d like to say it doesn’t [matter.] I really would like to say it doesn’t. But if the way that other people are going to treat you, or the other opportunities people are going to allot you, or the way

you manoeuvre yourself within this world... if it didn't have to be connected to your identity, then no, it wouldn't matter. You see me for what you see me as, I could see myself for what I see myself as, who the [expletive] cares. But because it does affect what you do sometimes, I think it has to, at some point... I dunno... be understood. I think you have to understand who you are. And I still don't understand who I am." Part of the process of acting, it seems, allows him to explore parts of his character in order to gain a better understanding of himself. "I act because I don't allow myself to experience certain emotions or certain degrees of those emotions because I like to keep myself even keel. It doesn't always work, right? But sometimes—for example on the most extreme end, a murderous character has a murderous instinct, or intent. Probably every human being, if pushed to the right level, could feel that. Not act on it, but could feel it. I think most of us choose not to allow ourselves to go that far. But when you act, you can go that far. [...] I think acting allows me to explore parts of myself that I don't allow myself to explore in my real life."

We discussed the pervasiveness of stereotypical Asian male images in American popular culture and the way his appearance as a Eurasian conflicted with his inner self and the implications for his professional work. I asked him if he saw himself in the images of Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu, or if he thought other people saw that in him. "I think when people see me, they *don't* see that, because of my mixed heritage. I think I *feel* inside—in terms of what my identity is and how I believe myself—more like that caricature than people see me as. I think it's because my dad, and my Gong Gong (my grandfather) and my Poh Poh⁸³ [...] and my uncles and my aunts on that Chinese side... I

⁸³ Grandmother.

never saw myself as being that different from them. So when I see *them*... that's what hurts the most when I see those caricatures, because that's my *family* they're talking about, my family that they're portraying. It sucks because someone out there is seeing those images and not questioning it. Someone out there is seeing those images and... they wouldn't be putting those images out there if it didn't ring true for a huge population of people. So I think that even says more about—whether we're talking about American entertainment, the American population, or whether we're talking about entertainment in other places, European entertainment or Chinese entertainment, whatever it is—those images that are being put out there because somebody sees that as being true. What the [expletive] does that say about who we are as a people? That's really unfortunate. I want one day for all of those images and those caricatures to be gone, [...] big ass triangle hat, long skinny black moustache—*no* eyeballs... What the [expletive]... they don't think Chinese people have eyeballs! Do you understand what I mean? When they just draw a line, and the actual cartoon characters, they just have lines [for eyes]. Chinese people have eyeballs, Goddamn it! It's just remarkable that they think they don't."

His different physical appearance as a mixed race person is very often a point of contention for other people when they see him. He is like a physical embodiment of people's internal conflict between their expectations of established stereotypes and the form he presents. "If someone comes up to me out of nowhere, which happens to me a lot, because people can't tell what I am—people at airports sometimes won't let me through because I don't look like a Wong. It's weird that my name is... I never thought about it growing up, for me it didn't seem like my name was a stereotypically Chinese name. Obviously it is a Chinese name, so that's clear, but stereotypes are created by outside

sources and I didn't realise when I was a kid that the outside world had chosen a name like mine—the last name of Wong—and used it to stereotype a body of people. I grew up and then Alan Wong became synonymous with a typical Chinese male before people would meet me.

“What's really weird is that being mixed and being male has a whole different set of feelings, because now I'm smack dab in between two archetypes. It has to do with the fact that I'm tall and my body is large. Parts of me speak towards what Hollywood has portrayed as this leading, debonair, white male. Parts of me are pulled to the Asian, stereotypical, emasculated male. If you would ask me where I would wanna be in this, I would want to be *right here*. [Bangs twice on table to emphasise the words and indicate the middle] I would want to play roles right in the middle. I don't wanna play this, and I don't wanna play this, right? [Indicates left and right.] There's not any space here, for acting. There's starting to be more [space], but the closest thing I can think of is... Keanu Reeves? He tapped into the area right here, close to the leading male, but not quite. He definitely hasn't gotten over here, closer to the Asian stereotype. This is a very empty space when it comes to roles or work, because you can find these, they're very stereotypical, and if you look the part, you can find these.”

Alan found the difference between the reception of his Eurasianness was very different in Hong Kong than it was in the US. This is probably due to the fact that in Hong Kong, whilst racial ambiguity is equally alienating, it is seen as a positive marker or status, especially if there is a white element in the mix. This “white-as-superior” attitude is a colonial inheritance. He described this difference as such. “Being Eurasian in the States is different than being Eurasian in Asia. [...] Here, actually, it's much more

understood at a glance that I'm mixed. Exactly what I'm mixed with, maybe not so much, but in L.A.—I don't know if it was the quality of intelligence that you find in L.A., or maybe inexperience or—I don't know what it was, but in L.A. it just came down to, 'What *are* you? Like, what the [expletive] are you?' Not all the time, but I would say more often than not, that question or a variation of it would come up in the first conversation I would have [with them]. Here it's different. See, what was interesting was that in L.A. people would always ask. Here I think people assume before asking. Maybe it's a cultural difference. [...] The assumption is not always correct. Sometimes they make the assumption that I'm half Chinese, most of the time they make the assumption that I'm completely caucasian. I guess in L.A., they could tell that something was kind of off about me, like I don't look like the perfectly caucasian—I hate those [expletive] words, 'perfectly caucasian' —but I guess I don't look like *that*, so they know something's different, so they're just curious. Here in Hong Kong, I think they just kind of... It's refreshing because they don't care as much about what exactly I am.

“There's a large possibility that I *don't* have a great idea of what they're thinking. Based on interaction, that's what I get. From more expat communities, I'd say they don't assume, it's a little bit more like L.A. where if they don't know, they'll ask, but I haven't been asked that much because I think most people figure it out pretty quickly. Maybe it's just that the expat community [in Hong Kong] has a lot of experience with multi-ethnic individuals. Eurasian is just a much more common theme or topic that's talked about or presented out here than it is in L.A. or in California.”

When it came to playing the role of the racially ambiguous Marcus Gee in *Yellow Face*, the role struck very close to home for Alan, as he and the character shared a lot in

common. “I knew from the very beginning that this play was something that I *really* wanted to be a part of, because it’s the first thing that I’ve ever done that deals with the topics of concern in my real life. It’s just such an interesting thing to play a character that is mistaken ethnically, who’s an actor. I mean, the parallels are remarkable. He’s an actor who’s mistaken ethnically, and I’m an actor who’s mistaken ethnically all the time. What’s *really*, really interesting—and I’m sure that you’ve noticed this already—is that my character in the play gets mistaken for Asian, and me as a character in my life gets mistaken as caucasian. In reality, I myself am right in between. But I’m playing the other side—d’ya see what I mean? —I’m playing the other possibility of being mixed, which is to be confused as Asian all the time. I’m always confused as caucasian, I don’t know why. [...] I usually get mistaken for a caucasian, for the first time, I get to see what it’s like to get mistaken for an Asian.”

The parallels between Alan and Marcus go beyond being on opposite sides of the Asian/white divide. Alan also experiences trouble with his name in real life. “Changing my character’s name in the play is really interesting idea for me because in my life it’s been, ‘Yes no yes no yes yes no no no, I don’t know, change it yes, change it no.’ *Everyone* has told me to change my name. My agent in L.A. said that I don’t look like a Chinese male and that I would not get leading roles if that was my name. He said, ‘My friends would see your name and throw your head shots to the side before looking at your picture.’ Fair enough. I come out here and my current casting agency wants me to change my name too, because they think I’ll be more marketable as a caucasian. My teaching company wants me to change my name *also*, because they don’t think Chinese parents want their kids to learn English from someone with the last name of Wong.

“I want to tell you an interesting story, about my name. My family came over here three or four generations ago during a period called the Chinese Exclusion Act in America. I know you know about this. I’m sure you’re familiar with the term ‘Paper son, Paper daughter?’ [...] So my last name’s not Wong. It’s not my real last name. My great-great grandfather purchased that last name to get to the United States. My last name’s actually Leung. People don’t know this! I think that Wong is a very, very popular last name—Wong, Lee, Chan—super popular Chinese last names, in China also, right? But I have this sneaking suspicion—I’ve been telling it to people, and I have *no* idea if it’s correct or not—but I think that there are certain last names that are more popular Chinese last names in the United States than are statistically popular in Hong Kong or China, because there were more purchased names. A lot of Wongs that I’ve talked to—not a lot, but some—also know that Wong isn’t their actual last name. It’s crazy.

“My great-great-great grandfather—the first one to come over—he literally did build part of the railroads, you know? When people see me, they think I’m caucasian, or they think I’m white, right? But I have *family* who’ve been through all of the things, just like someone else who’s full-blooded Chinese, I have family who’ve dealt with the same racial slurs, they’ve dealt with the same oppression, they’ve dealt with those times in America, so I strongly associate with Chinese culture in a way that’s much more strong than how people see... I’m much more Chinese than how people see me. I *feel* more Chinese than anyone will ever see me as, and that’s really interesting, right? Because now I’m playing a white guy, who wants to be Chinese. [This show] just has a lot of interesting cross-sections of all this different stuff.”

In all three instances, the interviewees were motivated by their personal

preferences, experiences and beliefs which influenced their choice to become involved in the shows. As it is impossible for anyone to measure and compare the experiences of any performer to any standard, I must revert to a subjective and specific discussion of the three interview subjects. Janice's choice to play Mrs. Meers was based on her penchant for evil characters, which had little to do with the racial aspect of the character, although it did pose a challenge for her on how to play the role respectfully. Her subsequent performance became a factor in Eric's decision to produce *Yellow Face*, as a response to, and reflection of, the experiences he had growing up Asian American. Alan, too, drew from his experiences growing up Eurasian and used them to explore his own identity through the portrayal of Marcus Gee. Subjectively speaking, it seemed that it was a more reactive and problematic process for the Asian Americans, who have the minority mentality ingrained in their past experiences and must therefore struggle with those issues during the process of crafting a performance of race. Janice didn't really see that there was much of a problem with performing Mrs. Meers, as long as she did it respectfully and in a way that would emphasise the ludicrousness of the caricature, thus affecting the audience's ability to trust the character's believability. Eric, with his past experiences of being subjected to racial prejudice, would unsurprisingly find the subject matter much more potentially offensive than Janice did. Alan, with his mixed heritage, was in a unique position in which to explore the possibility of being mistaken as another race, as his physical appearance represents the problematic contestation of racial identity.

Although these interviews represent only three individual experiences of many actors who are of Asian American descent and others who have acted in yellowface, I can conclude that each performance was an intensely personal choice for all three subjects,

and that it is impossible to remove oneself from the role that one plays on stage and off.

The irony and incongruity of these shows being performed on the Hong Kong transcultural stage was apparent to all three subjects, stemming from the location in which they were performed, the parallels found in the Drama and in real life, and in the personal connection each subject had to the material. All three subjects found that Hong Kong was a place that gave them the opportunity to produce or perform in these shows, which they might not have had the opportunity to otherwise. For Eric and Alan, both found that the Hong Kong amateur theatre scene allowed them greater opportunities to produce and play roles that would otherwise be inaccessible to them stateside, because of their Asianness. It is possible to conclude from this that the transcultural stage of Hong Kong allows for greater freedom and opportunity for Asian Americans to explore what it means to be that race in performance, with less restriction applied to them because of their raced bodies. This greater freedom is not restricted to Asian bodies, but also allows the white body to perform in yellow face with the (arguably perceived/imagined) decrease in restrictions against such racialised, stereotyped performances. Whatever the nuanced differences between the three subjects' experiences, one common theme can be seen: That the Hong Kong transnational stage has provided (at least for these three American performers) a different dynamic than that found in the United States, which allowed them to explore the performance of race in a new way.

Conclusion: "And I go back to work, searching for my own face" -DHH⁸⁴

I began this thesis by stating my belief that acts of yellowface on a transcultural

⁸⁴ Hwang, *Yellow Face*, 63.

scale are a valid place where Asian American identity can be reproduced and examined. I discussed literary themes found in both *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and *Yellow Face* that reinforced the Asian American as existing in a state of perpetual abjection within the United States. I then drew comparisons between the Hong Kong and American civil rights movements. Both have a history of whites functioning as the dominant group through colonialism or cultural imperialism—from the rhetoric in government policy, to the sociocultural practices exercised to marginalise, stereotype and segregate the Chinese and other Asians from the white population—to reinforce the white/other dyad. I discussed how western theatre and culture was a place of institutionalised exclusion and segregation in colonial Hong Kong, and how that colonial mindset manifests itself today in the English language amateur theatre groups, and in the arts in general. I related the personal experiences of three of the Performers in these two productions, in order to examine the performances through their point of view, as they were particularly situated at the transcultural intersection.

While these case studies cannot be representative of an answer to the continuing problem of the Asian American as perpetually abjected in American culture, I believe that this shows that on a transcultural scale, such performances of the abject can give a Performer (i.e. anyone who is involved in the production, from producing to watching such performances) a different perspective on the same material. It allowed Alan and Eric a level of freedom to explore their own racial identities through the performance of race and race-facing, whilst situated in a different sociocultural environment from the United States. Perhaps the most pivotal difference found in Hong Kong was the lack of racial sensitivity to stereotypes manifested in American culture. The origins of the American

yellowface stereotype are arguably not well known in Hong Kong, therefore its roots in hurtfulness are absent, or at least weakened. A Hong Kong audience sees the product of racial inequality without intimate knowledge of any specific American historical context. Perhaps my own point of view illustrates this detachment as well. I learned that yellowface is offensive through my education in American Studies, but that knowledge does not necessarily translate into the instinctive, visceral reaction to its offensiveness that Eric and Alan feel. This is perhaps because I did not grow up in a society where Chinese racial differences were emphasised in the specific way American culture emphasises it through the media, politics and in this case, the tradition of yellowfacing. My visceral indifference and intellectual detachment may not say much about my morals or my ability to empathise with my interviewees, but perhaps detachment (whether emotionally or geographically) assists an individual in gaining traction on the slippery slope created by perpetual abjection. In the case of the interviewees, performing in Hong Kong opened up new artistic opportunities for them, and allowed Alan and Eric room to explore roles that had a direct correlation to their own personal and racial identities. On a transcultural stage, the perpetually abjected Asian American is no longer wholly passive and can gain some agency, even as those very same stereotypes are reproduced. While this may eventually create a different kind of abjection on a transcultural scale, it is more the *movement* in between the cultural and the transcultural that can temporarily displace the elements of yellowfacing, forcing the rearrangement of the same elements into a different framework, which in turn allows each element to be examined in better isolation, however transient that isolation might be.

Appendix A

Eric Ng
Narrator

Iris Eu
Interviewer

November 13, 2010
at Pacific Coffee Company, Lyndhurst Terrace
Hong Kong S.A.R., China

IE: I wanted to start with some background stuff. How old are you?

EN: I'm thirty years old.

IE: What is your nationality?

EN: I was born in New York, so I'm an American citizen. I grew up for a few years in New York. We moved to Ohio when I was about four or five. I lived there until I was about thirteen, and then we moved to Hong Kong. I went to high school here [in Hong Kong] and for college I went back to the U.S. I was working around New York and Ohio again for a few years after that, and then I came back to Hong Kong. I was originally doing information technology but my degree in college was a BSc in Business Administration, Concentration in Marketing and Management Information Systems and a minor in Drama. It got some strange looks when I was walking at graduation—when they presented my degree and even the guy who was presenting was a little bit like, Well, that's a very weird combination.” It wasn't actually on purpose. I had an interest in theatre so I took all the theatre electives that I could. I did what I could to get the Information Systems degree, but any other elective choices I had, I was putting into Drama. When they were deciding my degree—because at the time you didn't have to declare [your major]—so they just looked at the record and said, “Drama actually qualifies.” I did work in modern American, modern Irish and modern European drama. That was evident when I came to Hong Kong and started Looking Glass Productions—the first two shows I did were actually Irish shows. *The Pillowman* and *Inishmore* are both by Martin McDonagh.

IE: So you've done his work in university?

EN: I never got a chance to. McDonagh is a little dark for university, and because we were a student-run group, we were always worried about audience numbers. It was always farces or light musicals. We did things like *Damned Yankees* or *Once Upon A Mattress*—shows like that. I always wanted to do something more serious or darker. Our student group couldn't do that, because—again, we're student-run and we had no outside funding or sources, so everything had to come from ticket sales. If we didn't do a good

show, we wouldn't be able to do a show the next semester. We had to play it safe.

IE: So, bottom line stuff again, right?

EN: Yeah, yeah. You appeal to the masses. That's good. Some of these shows were... I loved *Damned Yankees*. It's not exactly a very deep show.

IE: If somebody asked you what you were, would you just say you were American?

EN: Yes.

IE: Would you cut that down to Asian American?

EN: Asian American, yeah. Here, I'd just say American and they acknowledge the Asian part. When I'm in the U.S., it's Asian American. Especially if you're growing up in Ohio, there're not a whole lot of Asian Americans in that area. I always identified myself first as American, because it was just easier to [say that in order to] get along with people in that area. They look at you, and they assume you're Asian. The second they see you, they already have all these preconceptions. But if you start talking to them and you say you're American, then they start realising you have the same background. You still grew up in the same place, you still went to the same schools. It's a little easier to get around that way.

IE: Are you fully Chinese then?

EN: Yes.

IE: Okay. Would you differentiate between an Asian American or a Chinese American?

EN: Hmm... it depends on where I am. Here, I would say American and the Chinese thing is assumed. In college, there was a group of people who identified themselves as Chinese American and I didn't quite get that. There were a lot of Japanese and a lot of Korean students in college as well and frankly, we all had the experience of having been elsewhere or having spent time outside the country. Even though not every experience was the same, a lot of the experiences were the same. A lot of the people who identified themselves as Chinese American, they were the ones who had maybe grown up in Hong Kong rather than in the U.S., so they were third culture kids. They would identify as Chinese American, whereas the ones who had grown up in the U.S., we really didn't see a difference [between Asian American and Chinese American]. For me, it was mostly "American."

IE: Remind me again where you went to college?

EN: Babson College, up in Massachusetts. About ten miles west of Boston. It's a small business school—have you heard of Wellesley?

IE: Yes.

EN: It's right next to Wellesley.

[removed question from Iris where she asked if it was a three year course – got confused with British system]

IE: Why did your family move to Ohio?

EN: My parents immigrated to New York in the 1970s from Hong Kong. They were holding down menial jobs. At one point, they had enough money to open a greeting card store. That worked for a little while. It got robbed and they had to shut it down. My dad worked as a waiter for a while, then he got a job as a wholesaler in a department where they sold air conditioning units. It was good, steady work and he was there for about a year or two. They got bought out by a company in Ohio. He was suddenly very worried—this was the first steady work that he'd had and he was still trying to make it in the U.S. He graduated from high school but never went to college. He was a little worried, but the company said, "We're looking for people to come and work, so we'll buy this wholesaler, but why don't you come to Ohio. We'll get you a job working on the international side," so that's what he did. He got into sales and started doing international work there. He was happy, and it was steady work. The downside was that he had to move to Ohio, but compared to not having a job in New York, it was significantly better. It was really because of the job. We went there, he worked for a few years, and then the company—which is a multinational corporation—decided to open a Hong Kong branch in 1993. At this point, he was a director in the company. He'd worked his way up from the wholesale department to director. They said, "Look, we're opening this branch in Hong Kong, we know you're from there. We'll make you a vice president and we'll send you over to Hong Kong." It was a case of, "Hmm. I get to go over to Hong Kong, and this time I get paid to do it. Why not." So he moved over to Hong Kong. All our moves seem to be work-related.

IE: It must have been really difficult moving to Ohio from New York.

EN: Moving to Ohio wasn't bad, because I was four or five at the time, so I didn't really know. Also, we lived in Queens. It isn't exactly the best part of New York.

IE: Did you ever move back to New York?

EN: I lived there for about six months after college. I was looking for work and I was interested in doing theatre. I was offered a scholarship to go to a prestigious drama school in New York City.⁸⁵ But even with the scholarship, as a fresh graduate I had student loans to pay off, I was still looking for jobs. I didn't wind up going. One of the reasons why I didn't attend was—they offered me the scholarship and they invited me to the campus to go and check it out. I'm doing the tour with the guy from the drama school—

⁸⁵ The name of the school has been withheld in this transcript by request of narrator.

we're looking at the dorms—and I asked him, “I would like to be an actor, I'd like to work in New York, and I'm just wondering, after I do the drama program, what can I expect... how will it help me?” The guy was very honest and very frank, and he said, “Well, look. You can probably do something like *Miss Saigon*, but outside of that, don't get your hopes up.”

IE: He actually said that?

EN: He actually said that outright. Like I said, he was being very honest about it. At the time, you didn't really see a whole lot of Asians on TV—

IE: What year was this?

EN: This was 2002.

IE: And he's not Asian American?

EN: No. This guy is—I don't know what position he was holding in the drama school, but he was pretty high up. It was simply an issue of what he knew at the time. Of the shows that you would see on Broadway, you didn't see a whole lot of Asians on stage. People aren't expecting it, they're not used to it and with so many actors in New York, you don't have to choose an Asian to play the role, when there are fifty other actors who look the part and you can cast them instead. He was very honest. “We'll teach you the skills, we'll teach you how to sing, teach you how to act, and you can do something like *Miss Saigon* or you can do... *Thoroughly Modern Millie* or something like that. You can do something like that. But outside of that, there're no guarantees.” Frankly, there's no guarantee for anybody who decides to enter the acting industry. I was thinking about that, and at the same time I'm looking for work. It was a decision... you know, it's probably better to save what little money I still have and use it for something else.

IE: I didn't actually know you wanted to be in Broadway musicals. Was that your first interest?

EN: My first interest was plays. Not so much musicals. I definitely wanted to get the training for musicals because that's where the money is. That's what people do. In 2002, musicals were a very big thing, more so than dramas and plays. In the last eight years, there's been a switch. Last year, you had—for the first time in a long time—more plays going up than musicals. Musicals on their own have gotten so expensive that—musicals have moved up into another tier of entertainment. Dramas and plays have become much more cost-effective these days.

IE: You're talking about on Broadway, or in general?

EN: On Broadway. *Wicked* cost—what, 14 million?—to put on, whereas a play, not even close to that much. You can use a smaller theatre, you can do more shows, you have

fewer actors, you don't have to fly a person on stage. I always found plays and dramas to be more appealing. Musicals are great, but I'm still getting around the whole “suddenly breaking out into song” element of things.

IE: It isn't very naturalistic.

EN: It isn't... I do like musicals. I've been in a couple of musicals, I like doing musicals, but dramas and plays are really where my heart's at.

IE: Is there a specific kind of drama or play that you like?

EN: I seem to be attracted to black comedies.

IE: Yes. That I've noticed.

EN: The McDonagh thing sort of gives it away too, I guess. I was always under the impression that, as an actor or a director or a producer, when you're doing live performance or entertainment—as in a play or a drama—it's a very unique style. You have a chance, you have an opportunity, while you have someone in the audience, to affect them. You have two hours, or an hour and a half—or however long you have in front of them—to provoke a reaction from the audience members. It's very different from film where you work very hard to get that one take, get that one shoot down, and it's sort of one-sided. You're throwing all this emotion, all this material, at the camera. Once it's edited and directed and goes through post-production, and all this stuff is done, then it goes out to cinemas. You don't have that luxury in theatre. It's a two-way communication. Anybody who's sat in the audience at a very good show will understand that there is an energy between the audience member and the actor. There's a connection there. It's sort of like—not that I would know—taking drugs. There's a high from being on stage, from getting into the role and feeling that connection and that energy between the audience member and you. It's indescribable and it's addictive. That's why people do it, I think. They get a taste of that, and they want more.

IE: Is that why you're sticking with drama?

EN: Yeah, 'cause... A lot of my friends have moved into film. That's where the money is. Film is much more popular. Film is more of a director's medium. Most of my friends are moving into the directing fields now. And film is much more mainstream. Stage and theatre still has something about it that can't be replicated via film.

IE: How is the theatre scene here in Hong Kong different from where you were in the U.S.?

EN: When I was in Ohio—and this is going to sound very strange—I lived in a small town and I was about thirty minutes out from Dayton, Ohio. It's one of the largest towns in Ohio, but not by much. It's actually quite small. But they have an incredible theatre

scene.

IE: That's surprising to hear.

EN: Yeah. It is very surprising. Dayton, Ohio—I only found this out after I moved there to work—apparently, back in the fifties and sixties, they had this thing called summer stock that would travel around the United States. Dayton, Ohio was always one of the stops. So you'll have at this local pizza place that we used to go to—pictures of future Hollywood and Broadway stars who just came by this pizza place, because they would always do summer stock, and they would always come to Dayton. This one playhouse that I worked at—Dayton Playhouse—they have pictures on the wall of Allison Janney from *The West Wing*, and who was the other guy... Rob Lowe. They got their start at Dayton Playhouse. Actually almost all of the cast of *The West Wing* got their start in Ohio. It's crazy because you see photos on the wall of where these people got started. They had an annual play festival called FutureFest, where critics from New York would come down to see and judge. One of the plays that I did in FutureFest in 2004—or 2005, I can't remember—was called *Farragut North* by a guy names Beau Willimon. After FutureFest, the critics saw his plays and suddenly he was getting referrals to New York. The play managed to get a Broadway opening in 2009 with Chris Pine and Chris Noth. If I recall correctly, the film rights just got picked up with George Clooney and Leonardo DiCaprio.⁸⁶ That also got started in Ohio, in this one little playhouse.

IE: So when you got to Hong Kong, how was that in comparison? It must have been pretty dismal.

EN: It was pretty different, yeah. I remember when I was in high school [in Hong Kong] that the theatre scene in Hong Kong was very limited. You had three groups: American Community Theater, the Hong Kong Players and the Hong Kong Singers. That was it. When I came back in 2006, it was still those three groups. I think at that point, Stylus was just getting off the ground.⁸⁷ Independent theatre groups were just starting to take hold—at least on the English scene. On the Cantonese scene, it's been up and down. Stylus is now a big-time group. Back in 2006, the shows that would go on were all mainstream shows. You would have *Anything Goes*, which was the Singers' show at the time—light entertainment... it was good. Again, with light entertainment, you go there to have a good time and that's great. There's a time and place for that. There was no group that was doing shows that would actually provoke reactions or emotions. That was one of the reasons why I wanted to start Looking Glass. I started throwing around the idea that—well, I'm working, I've got some money, why don't I rent out one of the theatre spaces in The Fringe Club, and put together a show.⁸⁸ I like reading plays—other people read novels, I

⁸⁶ *The Ides of March*.

⁸⁷ Stylus Productions was one of the first successful and long-running independent amateur theatre production companies to be established beyond the three big English amateur theatre companies (Hong Kong Singers, Hong Kong Players and American Community Theatre.)

⁸⁸ The Fringe Club, on Lower Albert Road, was established in 1984 as an arts space and has two small theatres for stage shows.

read plays—and one of the plays I'd read was by McDonagh, called *The Pillowman*. Beautifully written. It's one of those few plays that you know is good, because you put it down and you can't get it out of your head. A lot of plays you'll read and think, okay, I liked some parts, and then you forget about it. This play—and just by reading it—is disturbing. If I'm going to put the money in, then I'm going to do the show I wanna do. I put in the money, I put in the time, and we got *Pillowman* off the ground in 2008. We had really good reactions, and from there we started moving into other things.

IE: You were in *Beauty and the Beast* with the Hong Kong Singers. What part did you play, and what made you choose the role?

EN: I played Cogsworth. I have a friend in Hong Kong who I got to know in 2006. She was throwing around this idea of doing *Beauty and the Beast*. It's not really my cuppa tea—I wouldn't normally do that sorta thing—but she asked me to audition and so I did. She offered me the role of Cogsworth. I figured, well, it's something different, so I might as well give it a shot. I actually had to sing on stage, which I don't do a lot, for good reason. Like I said, we actually like to attract people to buy tickets, and me singing is not going to do that. It might attract people to try and get refunds. [Both laugh] Singing is not my strong suit. I had a costume that was about six feet wide and weighed about sixty or seventy pounds. At one time during dress rehearsal I got stuck in one of the lighting towers. Yeah, thanks for bringing up memories of that!

IE: [Laughs] You're welcome! Soon after *Beauty and the Beast*, in 2009, The Hong Kong Singers—the same company—decided to do *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. I wasn't around to see how your reaction was to that, so I would like you to describe it for me. How did you first hear about it, what happened and what did you think of it?

EN: I first heard about it through the grapevine that Singers was looking at doing another show, and the show they were planning on doing *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. I know of the show.

IE: What did you know of the show, at that point?

EN: I knew that it had gotten a revival on Broadway. I'd seen bits of the show and I knew of the original version. It was very strange. I was a little bit bewildered as to why a group like the Singers would choose to do a show like that. Before *Millie*, I'd also had some objections to them doing the show *Anything Goes*.⁸⁹ A good friend of mine who's also Asian American—she's Eurasian, she grew up in California—we went to watch *Anything Goes* and we saw, basically, two Asian actors going on stage in very traditional clothing, in very Charlie Chan—very stereotypical depictions. And these were two people who I know spoke very good English.⁹⁰ They don't have any accent. But you see them on stage and suddenly this really, really thick Chinese accent comes out. My friend and I just had our head in our hands. We've both had to deal with the whole stigma of having to be

⁸⁹ The Hong Kong Singers produced *Anything Goes* in March 2008.

⁹⁰ Leonard Wong played John, and Tyrone Seto played Luke.

Asian in areas where there aren't a lot [of Asians]. She had it a little better. She lived up in San Francisco, so there were a lot more Asians around there and they were a little more accepted. I remember growing up in Ohio in this small town and having to deal with these kids—it was in junior high, these were kids, but—coming up to me and making the chinky eyes, and the “ah so” comments—

IE: Did you get that a lot?

EN: I got that a lot. It was weird because up until I was about ten years old, I spoke only English. I didn't know any Cantonese, I didn't know any Chinese. I couldn't quite understand why these kids were doing this. But, again, they weren't used to seeing Asians, so they would come up and make the jokes and the comments and—again, they're kids, what are you gonna do. At the same time, you did have to fight that. I remember a couple times—my cousin coming from New York, he was about five or six years old, and I was about, maybe nine? Ten?—we'd be walking down the street and this group of kids would come up and start asking us questions. They wanted me to translate for them. My cousin speaks perfectly good English. He speaks just as well as I do. They were like, “Hey, you, why don't you translate for him. We can't understand chink.”

IE: Gosh. Horrible.

EN: They're kids. They're going to do that. That's why I have this whole aversion to people thinking I have an accent, or that I won't know English. So you see a show like *Anything Goes*, the actors have perfectly good English, and they have absolutely no reason why they shouldn't be using that, and they're putting on these really heavy Chinese accents and they're playing the stereotype. I didn't have so much of a problem with it in *Anything Goes*, because everyone [in the show] plays a stereotype. That was fine. Then you hear about a show called *Thoroughly Modern Millie* coming in, that you have—the whole thing is stereotype again, but still—you have the whole yellow devil, yellow peril argument where these two Chinese laundrymen—and of course they're going to have to be laundrymen, aren't they? —that are kidnapping white women to sell to Beijing or Peking. It makes a lot of sense that a lot of the guys who were putting on the show were both British and white, and that they would say, “I don't see a problem, I don't understand what the deal is.”

If you're American, there's a whole history of what they call the Yellow Peril. It was huge during WWII, and even in the fifties and sixties after, where it was, “Beware the Asian, they will kidnap your women, they will sell them to Peking.” There's been a lot of oppression there with the Chinese railroad workers in California in the 1800s, you had the Japanese internment camps in World War II. The thing about race in the United States is that you have the African American civil rights movement, but that doesn't obviate the Asian American from similar situations—it's not nearly as bad, I'm not trying to compare with the African Americans—but it's not as easy as people seem to think. I remember back in college, we were doing political science and we had this one visiting professor who was African American. He made this whole pitch about how the racial divide in the

United States has made things so much harder for African Americans, but he made it very specific that there were two camps. There were the African Americans, and then there were the whites, Asian Americans and Hispanics. He absolutely ignored the fact that us Asian Americans—maybe we may not have it as hard as the African Americans, but it doesn't mean we have it as easy as the whites do either. There's a lot of stereotype, there's a lot of bias, a lot of things that we have to fight to get through. And here we have a show that goes all the way back and plays right to that stereotype. It sort of affects me because, as I said before, théâtre is a chance and an opportunity—because you have someone's attention in a theatre for however long—to make them think. You have a chance to make them feel. It's a question of what message you're sending. Especially in Hong Kong—'cause in Hong Kong it's mostly because we don't have as much talent as we do in, say, New York—but you get more opportunities here. My opportunities as an actor in Hong Kong have been greater than they were in either Ohio or New York, because it was more a question of what you can do, not a question of your looks, you know? I did *Company*, I did *Beauty and the Beast*, I played Cogsworth—would I be able to do that in, say, New York or San Francisco? It wouldn't have happened. Or playing a retired judge in *Little Murders* for ACT in 2007, or even being able to do something like *The Pillowman*. You don't get those same chances in America. So to have [*Thoroughly Modern Millie*] play right back to stereotype in Hong Kong—having a show about two Chinese laundrymen kidnapping white women to sell to Peking—I was concerned, I have to say, I wasn't really feeling that this was a show that is good.

IE: Did you say anything?

EN: I did say something, actually. I voiced my objections at their—Singers have an annual meeting. I went, the director was there and he was introducing the show as, “Oh, it's going to be a great romantic comedy. It was on Broadway and so it'll be well known, it'll be great.” At that point I thought, I have to say something. I got up and I asked him about the race issue, and I probably burned a few bridges.

IE: What did you ask him specifically?

EN: I asked him if it was true that there are two parts in the show that were Asian brothers who were laundry men in New York, and whether or not he thought that this might not be appropriate, because you have two very stereotypical Asian roles in this musical that you're trying to produce in Hong Kong. It sort of got shaken off and laughed at by a lot on the committee. It's kind of funny that not a single person who was proposing the show was actually American or Chinese, or was aware of the background of that show. They look at it and they see something funny, because they turn it into a comedy, they turn the whole kidnapping thing into a funny... they're both completely incompetent, completely inept, because they're Asian. [Half laughs] One character is the 1940s Hollywood “Chinese” person—in other words, a white person in yellowface and eye makeup pretending to be Chinese—

IE: You're talking about Mrs. Meers?

EN: Yes, Mrs. Meers.

IE: I remember she would do the [performs action]—lift up her eyes...

EN: Ugh. [Groans and shudders] Uuuuggghh.

IE: Does that really bother you?

EN: That really bothers me. It bothers me because I have that childhood background of people doing that to me. Suddenly it's being played here for laughs and—it's sort of equivalent to a guy suddenly showing up in blackface, halfway through a show. It was disturbing to me. If you know the shows I do, I do a lot of disturbing stuff, but nothing disturbs me more than what I would see on that stage. It was a very personal thing for me, I think, and that's why, when I objected to the show, I made sure to say that this was my personal background that was objecting to this. So it wasn't like I was staging a boycott or that I was protesting. You had that in, I remember—David Henry Hwang protested *Miss Saigon* 'cause they cast Jonathan Pryce as The Engineer. I remember Cameron Mackintosh very succinctly saying, "I'm casting the best person in the role, and the best person in the role is Jonathan Pryce. It has nothing to do with race." I remember the counter arguments—basically saying that there is not a single good Asian actor on Broadway. It's galling to hear it. It's like saying you can put Jonathan Pryce in blackface and saying there's not a single good black actor on Broadway. That's clearly not true.

IE: Would it have been better if Mrs. Meers was not played by a white actress?

EN: Well, the problem is she has to be, doesn't she. She is a white actress pretending to be Asian. But then again, it plays back to the Hollywood [tradition of performing in] yellowface and blackface. In Hollywood in the forties and fifties, you didn't have black, Hispanic or Asian actors. You had white actors who either put on blackface, or put on yellowface and played Asian roles. You look at the old *Dragon Lady* movies and it's very clearly a white woman with her eyes taped up and eye makeup on! That's supposed to pass. As an actor in New York and Ohio, having to go through those experiences of—I know I have it, I know I can do the part, and even the director saying, "Look, if this was completely colour blind, I would have cast you in the part. The problem is, this person looks more appropriate." It's a catch-22. Asian actors are afraid to get into either Hollywood or Broadway because there are no roles, and there are no roles because there aren't enough Asian actors.

IE: How far were you prepared to go [with regards to the *Thoroughly Modern Millie* production]? You stood up at the AGM, you voiced [your concerns] against the show. Firstly, how did you feel when they just brushed it off, and secondly, what else did you want to do then?

EN: Well, I wanted to—like I said, a lot of it was due to personal issues. There was a lot

of temptation to bring it to the magazines—Time Out, HK Magazine, maybe—to raise the issue, to make it apparent in public that this was the case. I can't deny, it was really tempting to do that.

IE: Why didn't you do it?

EN: Because at the end of the day, my experiences are probably not the same experiences that a lot of other people in Hong Kong have. They didn't have to go through that. The reports I heard were that the show actually did do well—the Chinese people in the audience were laughing. That's fine, because they don't have that background, they don't have that history. Everyone looks at theatre and they see something different. What you see when you see a show may not be what I see when I see a show, and *Millie* was one of those examples. Local Hong Kong people, they saw a comedy, a straight up comedy that they didn't really have to think much about, but what I saw there was—you get flashbacks to when you were a kid, you get flashbacks to every part you were denied because you were the wrong race, every school that has told you, “You can play Thuy in *Miss Saigon*.” It was a very personal thing at the end. I just didn't want to be involved. I haven't seen a Singers show since.

IE: But you went to see *Thoroughly Modern Millie* in the end, right?

EN: I... I did... I didn't pay for the ticket. One of my friends who was working backstage got me a ticket. I figured I might as well just see what was going on.

IE: Why did you want to go and see it?

EN: I wanted to confirm... I wanted to see... There was always this hope in the back of my head that, maybe I'm just making too big of a deal about this, maybe it's not as bad as I think. Everyone else was saying it's not as bad as I'm making it out to be, so maybe I'll go out and I'll see if that's true. I went and... uh... yeah, it was... it was a little bit painful... 'Cause it was... you go up there and you see it, and you see all of these people laughing at these jokes, at these portrayals, and you realise that you've been fighting your whole life to get away from these portrayals, and at the end of the day, that's what people want to see.

One of the things that I've always wanted to do when I started Looking Glass is that I wanted to make a dent—make an impact—on the people who have seen the shows. There is not a whole lot I can do. I'm not going to be President, I'm not going to be a senator, I'm not going to be someone who makes large sweeping changes to the fabric of our society. You do what you can, and if I can direct a show and I can change the minds of one or two people, I'm happy doing that. Then you realise... I was working at that for two, three years—doing my shows—maybe for a little longer, and you see something like this, and realise that it's going to take a lot of work! [Half laughs] It's a drop in the ocean, really.

Again, it's a personal thing. It's why I do shows like *The Laramie Project*, or *The Pillowman*, because I feel like you have the opportunity when you're doing theatre. It's a very unique art form. You have the opportunity and the chance to affect—to profoundly affect, maybe—the people who are there to participate and watch. There seems to be two mentalities. There are people who do it because they get to have a drink with everyone at the end of the day, and there are people who don't need the money, or people do it because they think it's great fun to go up and make a fool of yourself onstage. I don't deny any of that. It is great fun sometimes, but I think very few people these days actually see it as being affective. It can affect people. When you approach theatre, you need to approach it as—yes, you can have fun—but also realise that there is a history, there is a background to what you are doing. I don't think we really pay attention to that here.

IE: I want to ask a maybe slightly uncomfortable question. I want you to describe how you felt after you left the show. I asked Paul⁹¹ at the time how you reacted, and he told me that you were punching the wall.

EN: Yeah I have scars...

IE: Do you still have scars? That's not good. Can you use maybe five adjectives or phrases to describe to me how you felt? How deep of an effect did it have on you?

EN: I think leaving, I was... disappointed. I was furious, actually. You know me, I don't get angry a whole lot, but I was absolutely incensed by the end of that show. Yeah, disappointed, like I said, because you've been working this amount of time trying to do something good and then you go in and you see a full house watching a show and laughing because they have no idea about what the people who immigrated to the U.S. had to go through. Furious, incensed, disappointed... that's three... I need two more... I think that pretty much covers it though. You're both angry that they're laughing at something that you actually had to go through. I try not to take myself too seriously. I don't know how well that works. When there were times when you had to, as a kid, go through those experiences, and to have people laugh at those similar situations later on... it's hard to take. Especially if you are someone who—I came to Hong Kong and there was opportunity here and I took it, and I thought I did pretty well, I thought I was starting to make a dent, and then you see stuff like this and it's like, why bother. Heh.

IE: Why do you think that Hong Kong audiences, being mostly Chinese, were so indifferent to what they were seeing?

EN: This is my theory. The local Chinese in Hong Kong are the majority. They are not accustomed, or used to being, the one that is being singled out. You can see a show where you have classic white stereotypes and people can laugh because it's the majority. At the end of the day, they're still in the position of power. For those in the minority, it's a lot more galling. The problem is, the local Chinese have never been in the minority. Say that the portrayals were not of two Chinese laundrymen but of two Filipino domestic helpers,

⁹¹ A mutual friend, who watched *Thoroughly Modern Millie* with Eric.

for example, and you had an audience of Filipinos in there, suddenly I think the reaction would be very different. The local Chinese and the American Chinese seem to have different world views because they've gone through different experiences. Local Hong Kong Chinese have never had to deal with being a minority, have never had to deal with prejudice, have never had to deal with racism because they are the majority.

IE: That was what I was thinking at first. But I might want to contradict you on that. I'm not challenging you—

EN: No, no...

IE: —but Hong Kong was a colony, we went through a form of white oppression. So do you think that it's literally to do with being a minority in numbers that causes that kind of effect?

EN: Yes that's true. However, the oppression that you saw in colonial days hasn't really been apparent since the late 1970s. Starting in the eighties, you had the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and even since then, the British said, "We need to improve Hong Kong and build Hong Kong up so that we don't look bad when we turn them over." In the last twenty, twenty-five years, the people in Hong Kong have not had to deal with white oppression, essentially. Especially since 1997. That counts for a lot of people in Hong Kong.

IE: I'm actually surprised. Have you ever been standing in a store and there's a white guy next to you and they'll get served first?

EN: Oh yeah, that happens.

IE: Do you think those are isolated incidents?

EN: No I don't think it's isolated. That's sort of ingrained, yeah. I'm not so sure that that's so much a race issue. Maybe in the sixties or seventies, it would have been a race issue. I think these days, if people see you're white, you're either a tourist or you're an expat. If you're an expat in Hong Kong these days, you're either an i-banker or a lawyer or someone who has a lot of money or power.

IE: So it's more of a class thing.

EN: It's more of a class issue than it would be a race issue.

IE: I agree. Do you think that Hong Kong people in general are indifferent to race issues or race sensitivities? Or are we just ignoring it?

EN: I think Hong Kong is [a racist society]. We try not to acknowledge it, but it's there. You look at the treatment of the Filipinos in Hong Kong—you have domestic helpers in

Hong Kong who have been here dozens of years and still can't get permanent resident status because they're here as a domestic helper. You look at some of the more wealthy Hong Kong Chinese and how they treat their domestic helpers. Then you have the Nepalese in Hong Kong. I think there was a case last year where a Nepalese guy got shot by a cop in the head, shot stone dead, and there were huge race implications associated with that.⁹² It just sort of gets glossed over. People don't want to think about it. People in Hong Kong just don't want to think about it. They have to worry about their jobs, getting a pay check, their family—and that's all they want to worry about. The question of whether there are real issues of racism in Hong Kong is not a topic of conversation that people want to get into.

IE: Is it something more people want to talk about in the U.S.?

EN: I think it's more apparent in the U.S., but I think it's because the United States had to go through the civil rights movement, they had the issue of slavery... and then the whole concept of America being a melting pot for all these races, so it becomes a case where race issues are more openly talked about than they are in Hong Kong. Again, it's a question of racial experience, where you have a cultural background or history for Chinese Americans that is different than what you see in Hong Kong or in China. The cultural background for Asian Americans is very specific—people who either immigrated or made the trip to California in the 1800s and became indentured servants for the railroad companies, to build the railroads. Again, there were the internment camps and Yellow Peril—these are all very specific to Asian Americans. It's actually a topic that I've addressed when I've done shows. One show I did in Christmas 2008 was a show by Michael Golumco called *Cowboy versus Samurai*. That is my personal favourite, because it was the closest to my own personal experiences, which is that you're an Asian American growing up in a small town in the U.S., where there is not a whole lot of Asians and a lot of preconceptions and there's a lot you have to fight against. You either go with the flow, or you fight against it and you have to decide what you want to do. It was a show very close to my heart. I kind of did it as a reaction to *Anything Goes*, because I want to do a show where the key characters are, in fact, Asian Americans who do not have to pretend that they're anything but Asian American. Again, as actors, we get to take on roles and be different people, but how many opportunities do we get to portray someone who we actually look right for. We can think of all the musicals that have the stereotypical Asian roles—*Miss Saigon*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *The Mikado*, *Pacific Overtures*—

IE: *Flower Drum Song*.

EN: Yeah. How many opportunities does an Asian American get to actually portray an Asian American—it's not many. It was a show I wanted to do because it was the first time

⁹² On March 17, 2009, a police officer fired two shots at a homeless man who was sleeping on a hillside, killing him. An inquest into his death ruled the shooting as fair. Please refer to "Why Shoot Him?" The Hong Kong Standard, March 18, 2009, http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?pp_cat=30&art_id=79667&sid=23138175&con_type=3&d_str=20090318&sear_year=2009

you had strong, powerful roles that were Asian, and you didn't have to pretend to be anyone else but Asian.

IE: How well did all your shows do overall?

EN: *The Pillowman* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* did really well. *Cowboy* made its money back. That we did it in a small theatre and we still had pretty decent audiences. Obviously we're not going to make as much money as *Millie*, which gets to play in a 400-seater in City Hall, night in, night out and gets sold out audiences.

IE: And they have more money to put in.

EN: They do. Like I said, I finance my shows mostly by myself. So that's my money going into the shows, so I guess I'm happy that most of my shows have made back the money! Actually, my worst selling show was *The Laramie Project*, which is one of the shows I was most proud of, because we didn't try to play for ticket sales. We made the play on the basis that the people who will come to see it will be affected by it. If you can do that, then... who cares about the ticket sales, really? At the end of the day, it's just money.

IE: Thank you.

Appendix B

Janice Jensen
Narrator

Iris Eu
Interviewer

November 11, 2011
at the private residence of Janice Jensen
Hong Kong S.A.R., China

IE: If we could start with a little bit of background history of yourself? Where were you born and where did you grow up?

JJ: I was born in the United States, in New Jersey— [Jokingly] and no, not all people from New Jersey say “Jeuy-zee”—and I was living in New Jersey up until my mid-twenties before I moved to Florida. I spent most of my time between New York and New Jersey because that's what my mother did. We spent a lot of time in New York City as well as in Jersey.

IE: What would you consider your nationality to be?

JJ: That's a tough one. I am American. I was born an American, I was an American citizen up until a year and a half ago. I chose, as did my husband, to give up our U.S. citizenship. We have enjoyed living in Hong Kong so very much and do not see any benefit to holding a U.S. passport and quite a benefit to giving it up. Our identity does not change. We were born Americans, but the politics of it is not something we chose to... yeah.

IE: Out of interest, what passport do you hold?

JJ: We hold the passport of Saint Kitts and Nevis, it's a tiny island that most people have never even heard about, or if they have, it's just because somebody took a vacation there once. We've never even seen it—we literally purchased a passport. And that's fine. But we also have our permanent residency in Hong Kong.

IE: How long have you been living in Hong Kong then?

JJ: We are approaching our eighth year here.

IE: So you just got your Hong Kong permanent residency last year?

JJ: No, it was finalized this year. You had to apply for it, and then by the time they do all the paperwork... it happened this past summer. Yeah, so we're very excited!

IE: So you're Chinese now! [Laughs]

JJ: I am Chinese!

IE: Okay, if somebody said, "Where are you from?", how would you reply?

JJ: My automatic response is, "Originally from the U.S., but we are now from Hong Kong."

IE: Wow, that's quite a mouthful.

JJ: It is! But, you know, if someone wants the explanation, we're happy to give it to them, but we do not—even a little—say we're from the U.S. We don't consider ourselves from the U.S. We're happy with it.

IE: How long have you been acting for then?

JJ: I started acting when I was in my early teens. I could always sing, and I loved to sing. Someone said there was more to it, you could actually sing and act. Then it got a little hairy when they said, "You can just act," then I felt really uncomfortable. Like, what's wrong, can't I sing?⁹³ Looking back, I used to think I was quite the introvert, but as an adult now understanding it, I was quite the extrovert. Although my insecurities made me feel like an introvert, I was able to express myself on stage in ways that I probably couldn't have done in real life. It took a long time to get to that point—a *long* time. Even in college, I had to work for my first line out of my mouth not to be a stutter. I am not a stutterer. I have never been a stutterer in my life. I'm a communications major, I was taught to speak properly and well, especially when I'm thinking about it. I had to say the word "bellybutton" as one of my first lines in a show that I did in college, and it came out, "b-b-b-b-b-b-belly-b-b-b-but-button!" Of course, that was the night that my parents came to see the show, so... yeah, that was great! [Both laugh]

IE: So how many years would that be then? I don't want to date you, or age you...

JJ: No, that's okay. I'm 43. I probably actively started acting when I was about ten.

IE: What was your first role?

JJ: I would say it was a role with more singing than acting. I do put the two together, I don't think you can really do one without the other—or at least I can't. I had to sing *The Rose* on stage and I was accused by my classmates of playing a record—see, we did listen to records back then!—and lip synching. It was very embarrassing! I was horrified, because I thought that was worse than anything, I didn't realise that it was a compliment.

⁹³ Janice here means she is asking for permission to sing and act together. She is not asking for reassurance with regards to her singing abilities.

I wasn't happy with that.

IE: So what about the other roles you've played then?

JJ: Wow, hmm. My roles in the beginning were—and from the beginning—have been fairly crazy, brass... which again, I didn't realise... like Neil Simon's *Come Blow Your Horn*, which I did in my mid-teens. It was this woman who was an outspoken, drinking-too-much, you know, who wasn't too happy with her boyfriend and was happy to tell him about it, kind of gal. I played Gertie in *Oklahoma!*, who was just the most annoying, obnoxious, home-wrecking kinda gal, and then it progressed from there. My characters were usually bigger than life, but I think, again, it was my own insecurity. I felt so small in life that I idolised people who had a big voice, and who could project and express that through their acting. My secret as a child—and not many people know this—is that I wanted to sing like a big black woman. That was my goal. When I acted I used to think the same way. I was like, “If I was a big black woman with an attitude, how would that come out?” That was how I developed.

IE: Was there a particular “big black woman” that you saw when you were younger and wanted to emulate?

JJ: I lived in a black community growing up, for about a year and a half. Gosh, they all seemed to be loud and fo'ard. I didn't particularly like one over the other—there were a lot of them I didn't like. But I was listening to a lot of gospel music in that area and I was just blown away by the size of their voices, the passion with which they sang, and how they connected with people. I thought, “Wow, if I could do that... wow, that would be nice.”

IE: Were there any types of music that you were listening to while you were growing up? Other than gospel music?

JJ: Oh, yeah. I didn't listen to gospel music — every once in a while I heard it, and I loved it. [Pause] Rock and roll. I loved rock and roll. I loved folk music. My mother was very young when she had me, so I was listening to the music she was listening to, which was folk music. It was Peter, Paul and Mary, and the Smothers Brothers, Sonny and Cher—you know, it was very folksy. That's what I grew up with. And I loved show tunes. Show tunes were wonderful, they told a story and I loved the stories. I was very fortunate and I was taken to a lot of amazing Broadway shows when I was younger. I got to see Michael Jackson in *The Wiz*, I got to see Yul Brynner in *The King and I*—I've seen some pretty incredible stuff. That absolutely had an effect on me.

IE: What were your favourite show tunes growing up?

JJ: *West Side Story*. Hands down. First one, loved, loved, LOVED *West Side Story*. *Fiddler on the Roof*. I played it until the record was completely destroyed. Don't know what it was, but I loved *Fiddler*. Those are the two that really stand out in my head. And

then as I learned *Fame*—gosh, what kid didn't love *Fame* when it came out. I got to do the show when I was in high school, and they made me play the Stern Teacher. Go figure. [Both laugh]

IE: Where do you think you learned to act? Did you ever take any formal training?

JJ: I took very few classes. I developed on my own until I got into college. My mother probably put me in a couple of acting classes and a couple of singing classes. The singing classes didn't go very well, because when people want you to sing the way they want you to sing, they're not recognising your needs, especially if they're not highly trained. My voice almost got ruined by somebody who thought, you know, "Oo, we'll have fun with this one, and I'll get paid for it!" But I loved acting as well, so my mother did support that. When I got to college, though, was when I spent an entire summer doing summer stock, and every year I was doing a show, or two, or three. When you're in college, you have the ability to do things like that, whereas in high school, you know, [Falsetto] "Okay, you get to try out for the one show we're going to do all year!" [Drops Falsetto] Yeah, and what do you get out of that. College was really what put me on my path. I got to experience a lot of things. I even tried movies, which I didn't like.

IE: Really?

JJ: Yeah, it was boring. You sit around half the time, waiting for someone to say, "Okay, it's your turn!" Uh, okay. I waited all this time to... yeah, no, it wasn't my thing.

IE: Where did you go to college?

JJ: I went to William Paterson College, now it's William Paterson University. It's in a little town called Wayne, New Jersey. It's close to Newark... Parsippany...

IE: What did you major in, by the way?

JJ: I was an Interpersonal Communications major with a minor in theatre. The only reason I minored in theatre was because somebody said, "So, you're minoring in theatre!", I said, "No." They said, "Why not?" I said, "Why would I do that?" and they said, "Well, you've got enough credits." I went, "Really?!" I was just doing it for the fun of it. I never did it for a career. I never was one of those kids who had the dreams of grandeur—that I was gonna go off and I was gonna be an actress and a singer and that's what I was going to do with my life. I've always been more practical than that—and more scared than that. I never really had the determination or the grit to believe that I could go out and make it work. Since then, I've learned that, yeah, I probably could—but I didn't want to. I didn't like the people I was meeting in theatre, who would talk about their agents, and the backstabbing, and talk about who was sleeping with who to get what part. I thought, oh my goodness. Don't you people do this because you like it? Why would you be so mean? So from the time I left college to now, I do it because I enjoy it. If I don't think I'm going to enjoy something, I won't even attempt to audition, because, why would I?

IE: Is that basically how you choose your parts?

JJ: I do. I do.

IE: Is there anything else you base it on?

JJ: Well, for the very first show I did in Hong Kong—and the only thing I based it on—it was my daughter telling me she wanted to try out for *Annie*. I realised I would have to drive her to all of the rehearsals because she was only seven, and I thought to myself, gosh darn it, if I'm going to be driving her anyway... I asked her, and I said, “Do you mind if I audition with you?” [Falsetto] “No, Mommy, that would be great!” [Drops falsetto] And I got in. I did *Annie* with Hong Kong Singers. This is going back almost six-and-a-half, seven years. I got one part, and then I got another part [in the same show], and then I got another part, and then a week before the performances, the dog that they were using as Sandy disappeared off the face of the earth.⁹⁴ So with only eight days to go, I trained one of my dogs to play Sandy. Last but not least, they asked me to be in charge of the two casts of children.⁹⁵ There were two casts, eighty-three of them, and every Sunday, I was in charge of the kids. That was a full-on, full-on, trial by fire experience in the theatre world of Hong Kong. But it was my first ever show here, and I am happy to say I gained a lot of respect from the people I worked with. I did a couple more things—again, I'm loud and I'm brass, you know—they placed me where they thought I should go. You asked me, though, if there is anything else that makes me choose a show. Yes. I did *The Full Monty*, and the only reason I did it—I knew nothing about it going in—I wanted to work with the director, Arvin.⁹⁶ Desperately wanted to work with the director. I met him, I liked him, I liked the stuff that he did, and I thought, I don't care what the show is. I found out that he directed *Little Shop of Horrors*, and I was kicking myself for not having known that, because I would have loved to have done the show. Not enough, but had he directed it—I would have been there in a heartbeat. So that's why I did *The Full Monty*, and he gave me a lead part. He said, “What are you here to audition for?” I said, “I dunno, what do you want me to audition for? A girl's role would be nice!” And I said, “Do you want me to strip now, or...?” And they were like, “No the girls don't have to strip”, but I did—I did this strip tease in my audition. Don't ask me why. Would I ever do that again? Well, I guess for the right part! It was something I really wanted, and you

⁹⁴ Not literally. The owner could not be reached and it was presumed by the production team that they could no longer commit to performing in the show. The production team decided to recast the dog as soon as possible before opening night, in order to minimise any disruptions to the performances.

⁹⁵ The production team decided to use two different casts of children in order to ease the workload from the performing children, and to also maximise the number of children who could take part in the show. This was partly for financial reasons, as more cast members usually means greater ticket sales, especially for child actors whose family and friends would be especially eager to support. It is also seen by the production team as a way to foster new, young talent for future productions, by allowing them to gain experience performing in the ensemble cast.

⁹⁶ Arvin Robles, the current president of American Community Theatre. He is an amateur and professional actor, singer and director. He played the part of Jimmy in the 2009 production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* in Hong Kong, in the same cast as Janice Jensen.

learn early that you don't get a second chance to make a good first impression. For the parts I have wanted, I have very carefully gone in and made decisions on how I was going to present myself.

IE: So did you want to play the part of Mrs. Meers?

JJ: [Exhales and pauses] I was told what the character was, and I was not convinced by [certain aspects of the production⁹⁷], but I wanted the role. There were enough people who wanted me to do it that I was friendly with that I thought, you know what, this is a bit different for me. Plus, she is supposed to be a New York woman, supposedly Hong Kong Chinese—how fun would this be. I went home, I listened to the music and I thought, ah! [Makes “pfft” sound]... yeah, okay, I can do this. And I did. But I stand firm on my belief that if it's not fun, and if I don't think it's for the right reasons, then I won't do it. [Comments withheld⁹⁸] We had a *fantastic* show. We had some *phenomenal* seasoned actors that were able to just do it. Our lead, Millie, was great.⁹⁹ Some of the other females... Matt's¹⁰⁰ been doing this forever, he played the goofball well. It was a good thing, I mean, it *was* good. In the end I'm glad I did it and I enjoyed it.

IE: Did somebody else tell you about this role?

JJ: Yes. The director did not tell me—it was somebody else... and forgive me, but I cannot at the moment remember who it was. I'll let you know. I was approached during some other shows.

IE: So it was the first time you ever listened to the soundtrack of the musical. When you first read the book, what did you think about the character of Mrs. Meers?

JJ: I was nervous... because I realised that she was opposite of anything that I would ever be, and I had to be that, and that much more, because it was staged. I remember when I had to start using my Chinglish accent, my greatest fear was that I was going to walk out of the theatre and there was going to be a lynch mob waiting for me—that I had disrespected and just been horrible to the people that I love. Yes, it's a show, but sometimes people take these things very seriously. I was concerned about that. So it was even more important to me to make her bigger than life and more of a character than a real person. I didn't want anyone to believe that this could be a real person, but that she was just funny, and ridiculous, and unbelievable as somebody who would really do that—but be completely believable as a character. So it was a challenge.

IE: When you say that she was the opposite of anything that you would ever be—could you describe her to me?

⁹⁷ I have removed some of Janice's remarks here for ethical reasons, as they do not pertain to my research and may cast certain people in a negative light.

⁹⁸ Anecdotal remarks withheld for ethical reasons.

⁹⁹ Shareen Sing.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Collingwood.

JJ: Oh my God, she was a racist, she was a bigot, she was—you know—she was a slave driver, she was taking people from their homes and threatening people who worked for her that they would never see their mother again, she was wrecking families and wrecking homes and did this on purpose every day, just to make a buck, because she was unhappy with her life. This was a horrible, horrible person! But, okay, there was some irony in it. Look at where we're about to do it—we're about to do it in Hong Kong, and the two Chinese boys who are working for me are from Hong Kong and they're trying to get their mother to the United States from Hong Kong. The strangest—but I guess the best compliment I got—was from one of the boys who was in the show—and I mean boys, he was in high school—who had never heard me speak as Janice. He'd only heard me speak as Mrs. Meers. From the moment I was at rehearsal, I never spoke in any other way—I needed to be completely comfortable with this. The show ended, we went to our cast party and he came up and was so cute and said, “I'm so happy to work with you, Janice,” and I went, “Oh I'm so happy...” He *looked* at me, and said, “Are you kidding?” I said, “Am I kidding about what? No, I really enjoyed working with...”, and he said, “No, your voice!” And I said, “What about my voice? Well, I've been singing, maybe it's a little hoarse...” and he said, “No, I... I thought you really talked like that!” I didn't know whether he was joking with me but he was serious. I have—as a form of endearment—used this voice when I've talked to my students to try and get a point across. My Cantonese is horrible, but my Chinglish is pretty good! [Both laugh]

IE: Do you ever use her voice?

JJ: I do, I do sometimes. We'll talk about... I do animal welfare work. So I'm talking to the kids about animal welfare and we're talking about walking down the street where all the pet shops are, and they always have people out there trying to get people in to look at their puppies. They go, [Uses Chinglish accent] “Ohh missy missy, you come in here, you looka my puppy la, come on come on come on!” [Drops accent] And the kids are hysterical! Again, it is always done with the love and care and the respect that I feel for the people that I love and have become part of my family. Like I said, Hong Kong is my home. But there is a definite Chinglish that exists and it's not a bad thing, and I can't look at it as a bad thing—I find it very endearing.

I'll give you another example. Violee is one of our helpers who has been with the entire time we've been here, so going on eight years. She speaks English very well. You can absolutely understand her—thick accent, but you can totally understand what she is saying. Now, I have heard her for years. [Uses an accent] When we talk about the estatements, “Ah you need-a to get-ta from the bank-a, the estatements.” [Drops accent] Well, she really thought that it was spelled, E-S-T-A... I didn't realise that. I thought... the way she was saying it was not the accent, she thought when she'd heard it that that's what it was. She wrote down a list of things that I had to get, and one of them was a bank statement. She wrote “estatement,” and I said, “No, there's no 'e', Violee.” “Yes, there is.” I went, “No, there's not.” She doesn't use the computer, so it's not an 'e-statement'. I said, “Is this how you've been hearing it?” and she goes, “Yes, estatement.” “No, it's just

'statement'." She said, "Ohhh. I have to remember that one!" So again, it's sometimes how people hear something and they think that's the way to say it. I can't tell you how much I've butchered the Cantonese language. I'm sure! Thankfully I only let it out in front of friends, so that they can correct me without me saying something horrible. Today I had to read the students' names off of their certificates when they graduated, and I was saying each of their names, which are in Chinese. They giggled every time. [Demonstrates giggle] I could feel my face flushing! We turn into little kids ourselves when we say these things!

" But as Mrs. Meers, I had none of that. I was confident bastardising the Chinglish Chinese American as brutally as I possibly could—that's how I was. The worst part came at the very end of the show, where I'm supposed to say something in Cantonese that basically meant, "Oh what the heck, I'm going to jail anyway." What was very strange was that, however it was written in the script was not necessarily the right pinyin. I went to five different people and asked them for a translation, and I got five different answers with generally the same meaning, but they all said it differently. Some tried to add words, some tried to take away words. I can't imagine how difficult it is to switch it. When you say something, a word is a word, and that's what it means. In the English language, "read" [past tense] and "read" [present tense] are the same spelling. "I read a book. I like to read." How are you supposed to explain that to people? And then we look at them and say, "Oh my gosh, you don't know how to speak our language." What? That's anybody who doesn't speak English. I am very grateful that there is as much English spoken here [in Hong Kong] as there is, because it makes Americans like me integrate a lot more quickly.

IE: How long did it take you to develop the character of Mrs. Meers into what you thought she should be?

JJ: It probably took a few weeks. I was embarrassed to try her voice on local people—even friends, I mean I wouldn't just do it going down the road!—yeah, they would think I had lost my mind! [Both laugh] Either that, or they'd shoot me, I don't know! I was embarrassed. I had a hard time sharing it, because I didn't want them to get mad at me. I built up more and more confidence and then I would go to my Western friends and say, "Okay, you know how we go to Shenzhen and they say, [Uses Chinglish accent] "Ohh missy missy ohh, less goo' price for yoo!" [Drops accent] I'm going to do that, close your eyes and tell me how it sounds. They said, "Wow Janice, you're creepin' me out. I feel like I'm back in Shenzhen." And that's when I knew I had it. I wanted to be able to come up behind somebody and not have them know who I was. That's when I got it.

IE: That's voice-wise. I watched it, you did hit it spot on. But how about the character?

JJ: She was stupid, thoughtless, rude, self-centred and just plain mean. When my hormones are running as high as they can possibly be, and everybody is bothering me—that fevered pitch that I feel when I'm going to snap at the next person that knocks on my office door, I'm gonna rip their head off—that was Mrs. Meers. She was bothered by everything. Everything and everyone was beneath her, it was everybody's fault that she

was in the position she was in, she took no responsibility for herself. I would love to say I've never met anybody like that, but I have. I thought about those people that I've come across in my life who are like that. Then you take a piece from each of those experiences and build it into who you think Mrs. Meers should be.

IE: How much of Mrs. Meers do you think is actually you? If any? [Pause] Honestly?

JJ: [Jokingly] I know, I have to think about it, I wasn't willing to answer right away—*no*, I'm not like that *at all!* No I'm much nicer than that! [Pause] There is a scene where the older woman comes into to pretend to be an orphan and she wants to stay in the hotel. She wakes me up out of a sound sleep and tried to convince me that she's really [Falsetto] “all by herself and needs a place to stay.” [Drops falsetto] And I let fly some very sarcastic remarks. “Oh, I was an orphan and my family...” I say, “Oh yeah, like an orphan from the 1920s!” or whatever.¹⁰¹ Just really rude comments about her age, what she looked like and I think things like that sometimes. When I'm in a grumpy mood and I'm feeling very judgmental, those negative, off-handed comments definitely come into my head. The difference between me and Mrs. Meers is that she had no problem saying it. And I'm thinking, shame on me, and I scold myself later for thinking such grumpy thoughts. I think that's probably the only thing, except for the songs. The songs were big and bold and brassy and I loved that, and that is me. So the songs and the comments—everything else was Mrs. Meers.

IE: I don't know if you're a method actor at all?

JJ: Yeah... method acting. I have a hard time using that phrase because I've seen method actors backhand somebody and I couldn't do that. I mean, if someone paid me enough, maybe... [laughs] Or if it was somebody I really didn't like! Could I go around and trash a stage in anger? Yeah, I could. Could I make physical contact with someone and really hurt them? No. There is a line I would have to draw. There's that fine line, and I am not educated enough an actress to give you a fair definition to say that I fit into one category or another.

IE: I guess what I was trying to ask is, in rehearsal you have to be this rude, racist, horrible person. I don't act so I don't know, but I would suspect that I wouldn't be able to switch it off, or I would find it hard coming out of that mindset. Was that difficult at all?

JJ: Actors are probably one of the highest proportions of people in therapy. Exactly what you're saying—they can't switch it off. It's probably, in all honesty, one of the reasons why I didn't do it full time, because it would be too easy to get lost in the characters and

¹⁰¹ Act 2, scene 7: page 71. Millie, Jimmy and Mr. Graydon have just realised that Miss Dorothy has been abducted, and that Mrs. Meers is the culprit. They put into action a plan to entrap Mrs. Meers, which involves using Muzzy (who is an older woman) as orphan bait. Muzzy enters the Hotel Priscilla and wakes Mrs. Meers up at 3 a.m. to request a room. Mrs. Meers throws an indirect insult at Muzzy about her age, saying “You sure you come to right place? [...] The Hotel Priscilla, a residence for *young* ladies.”

not live the real life. Who are you? I see people portray amazingly difficult, deep, disturbed or angry characters and I think, how do they function after that? So no, I don't have a problem turning it off, but I also think it's because I definitely pace myself. I don't do too much to get lost. I can do a show full on and become the character. The Wicked Witch—a perfect example.¹⁰² I was the Witch, and I loved being the witch, I loved being evil and angry and disgusted by everyone and everything. I loved it. Then I got it out of my system and I could go back to being me. And it was fun! But if I had to do that every day of my life, and do a different one every few months or every few weeks... no, I think I'd lose my mind.

IE: What kind of roles do you think suit you? You've played the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, and then you played Mrs. Meers, and I know you auditioned for one of the roles in panto...¹⁰³

JJ: No, it wasn't... see I never get the cutesy roles, I asked them, please don't ask me to do a cutesy role. I feel uncomfortable being cute. That I don't know how to do. I was asked to do *Robin Hood*. I said, tell me who Robin Hood is. [Makes overt gesture and sings heroic tune] “Oh no, he's really just kind of sweet and helpful” and I went, “Okay, you just said sweet and helpful in the same sentence and you want me to try and play that?” I was lost. I heard myself talking and I thought, oh my gosh, I suck. I really suck! I was... yeah. It was embarrassing. I wanted to play the male bad guy. I wanted to play the Sheriff of Nottingham. And oh boy, I went in there and convinced them. But they said they wanted the Robin Hood to be female. They had a vision and they didn't want an all-female cast. I understand that. I can't argue with directorial vision, but I know that I gave a good performance. I don't mind, but they felt so bad that they couldn't get past this vision of theirs. “But yeah, Robin Hood's going to be female, you should audition for that!” I said, “You don't want me to do that. I'm not... that's not what I came here for.” Like I said, when I want a role, I go in full on. I went in there with a sword. It was a bubble sword. So as I [sings heroic tune, makes action of drawing sword] and whipped my sword out, the bubble wand came out and I blew bubbles for them. I felt great about that, 'cause it was panto! But I was not what they were looking for. That's okay. I don't get upset by that. If it was my life, my livelihood, what my rent depended on, I might take it a little harder. I've been very fortunate that I do it because I enjoy it.

IE: Would you say that you were attracted to evil characters?

JJ: Oh yeah. I like it! It is something that, like I was saying before, is bigger than life. I cannot be evil and loud and angry in real life. Well, when I'm driving, yeah, but nobody can hear me! On stage, I can be. When I was eight years old, watching *The Wizard of Oz*, I started practicing the laugh of the Wicked Witch. When I was eight years old! I thought it was the coolest thing. I'm not talking [delivers weak cackle]. When there was nobody

¹⁰² Prior to playing Mrs. Meers in October 2009, Janice also played the role of The Wicked Witch of the West in the May 2009 production of *The Wizard of Oz* by the Hong Kong Singers.

¹⁰³ The Hong Kong Players write and produce a Christmas pantomime every year, in the British tradition. This particular pantomime we discussed was *Robin Hood: The Panto* performed in 2011.

around, I'd let one fly! When I heard they were going to do it here, I thought, I've been practicing for this role since I was eight years old. I'm ready for it. Even though I went hoarse practicing for the audition, I was going to make sure that before I left that audition I was going to let one of those Wicked Witch laughs fly. And I did. Tony Penny¹⁰⁴ looked at me and said, "Oh my God, you're scary." I said, "Thank you. That's the nicest thing you could have possibly said." And I walked out there thinking, yep, got that one! It made me feel wonderful because it's something I've done often enough, being this loud, angry, mean character—brassy, you know. If I had to be truly mean mean, I don't know if I could do that either. These are truly character roles. I love them and I love doing them well.

IE: Did anybody ever come up to you and say, "You can't play Mrs. Meers. It's wrong." Did you get that feedback?

JJ: No. Not even for a minute. In the audition, when people were reading the role for Mrs. Meers—because they auditioned a number of people—they read it straight. When the slang was in there for the Chinglish, they read it in their own voice, using those words. I thought, wow, you don't sound Chinese at all! [Laughs] I went in there completely expecting to make them feel like they had been visiting Shenzhen.

IE: Yeah, because in the stage directions, it says that it doesn't necessarily have to be a particular accent. It just has to be what that particular actor has developed.

JJ: I know. Yeah. I knew that—having lived in Hong Kong, loving the experiences that I've had here from the people that have tried to talk to me, whether they've been serious, whether they're trying to sell me something—there's a blend [of accent]. There's something there, and I wanted to capture it.

There is one more piece to this. There's a woman—and I think they call her the Pink Lady?—she's a western Woman, who emcees a lot of the larger events for Western people in Hong Kong. The balls, the charity auctions—she gets up and she does a Chinglish routine that's so spot on. I was so jealous the first time I heard her and I thought, oh! I didn't know if she was local and trying to make fun of the westerners, or if she was a westerner and she was making fun of the locals, or what. I didn't know what she was, but she was funny, and that's why they hired her. When I started thinking about Mrs. Meers, I thought, aha! That's who she needs to be. The Pink Lady on steroids.

After I did the show, I saw the movie. It was totally different. 100% different. I'm so glad I didn't watch the movie [before performing in the show]. She was almost a non-character. She was this quiet, sullen, grumpy woman who didn't really have an accent—who just kinda flipped everybody off and the scariest thing about her was her little squeaky cart that she would push around. That wouldn't have worked for me. I would have never taken the role had it been that.

¹⁰⁴ Associate Director for the 2009 production of *The Wizard of Oz* by the Hong Kong Singers.

IE: Mrs. Meers is considered by the some in the Asian American community as somebody who's really offensive. There are people who really dislike this musical and thought that it was horrible. Did you know about this, or did you not think about this? Was it not a consideration?

JJ: Oh, I thought about it. When I tell you... I was really worried that I might bump into an angry mob after the show. It was something that bothered me. The night that I went on, I went, okay, we'll see how we go. I truly hoped that the way I had developed the character would convey to people that she was really an idiot. The reason I'm saying this is that we have a show in the U.S. called *All in the Family*. It was created by people who hated bigots and racism and sexism. They created the character Archie Bunker for people to laugh at. He became an icon. People just worshipped Archie Bunker and thought he was brilliant. Then of course, there were people like my family who realised he was an idiot. You're not going to get through to everybody. You're not going to convey the message to everybody. It's not just Mrs. Meers. It could have been the Wicked Witch. It could have been *Oklahoma!* It could have been a local Chinese show. It doesn't matter. People's perceptions are going to be different. So, it was a fun musical. In the end, she was arrested. Mom came back, so the people I had been so horrible to did get reunited with their mother. It was a good thing.

I hoped for the best. No one said anything negative to me. Now, maybe they didn't like it and they didn't say anything at all, so I don't know about that—but now it sounds like they did. You know, “No we don't like her but we're certainly not going to tell her.” Then there were people who complimented me on the character. That was great. You can't please all the people all the time. It was never meant to be offensive, and it was meant to show that stupid people are just stupid, and in the end, they get what's coming to them. That's wonderful. And who was the one who saved the day? Bun Foo and Ching Ho! That's the best part! Put the stupid western woman back in her place where she belongs. I'm okay with that.

IE: I've talked about it, not with many people, but I've talked about it. The only thing negative I've heard was from Eric. He was against the production. He wasn't against anybody in particular, but I think that he... it's because he is Asian American. Of all the acquaintance in this small theatre circle that is the local Hong Kong English speaking theatre community—he's the only Asian American. He was telling me how he grew up in Ohio and he was picked on for being Chinese. He had that racism against him growing up and it really affected him. He was talking to people to get the show shut down, and basically saying, “Don't do it. It's wrong, it's racist.” There was some talk of boycotting it.

JJ: It was kept very quiet. I never knew.

IE: It was very quiet. That's the thing. The funny thing is that he ended up watching it.

JJ: What did he think?

IE: He was upset.

JJ: OK. [Quietly] Is that why he doesn't talk to me anymore?

IE: He doesn't talk to you?

JJ: [Laughs] Well he didn't talk to me before that. I'm teasing, but... no, it's okay. Eric asked me to do a show with him once. It was the one—and it was a brilliant show—he wanted me to do the play about the gay boy who was lynched¹⁰⁵, and then all the townspeople who were... it's a very deep show. My life was going to hell in a hand-basket when he asked me. Not that I couldn't have fitted it in in the timeframe, but I so desperately needed to stay positive. That was what I emailed him. I said, “Eric, I need to explain this to you because I think it's a phenomenal show and I think it's a good thing to have here. This is why I can't do it.” He never responded. I thought, did you get my email? I'm not just a show tune girl, I would definitely do this! But like I said, I choose roles that are good for me. And me is my life. It's why I don't do it full time, because I don't want it to negatively impact my life.

Here's another little piece. After *The Wizard of Oz*—do you remember *Cats* was coming through town at this time—yeah¹⁰⁶. The producers for the show *Cats* were friends of Phil Whelan's¹⁰⁷. They came to see it on the last night. They came to our after show party. They wanted me to go to London and audition for Andrew Lloyd Webber. They went, “Oh my God, you so need to do this. For him—you so need to be their Witch.” I came home, talked to my husband, talked to the girls—they were no help, because they said “DO IT!”, and I thought, wow, you're such kids—talked to my husband again, slept on it. Twenty-four hours later, I knew the answer, but I waited another twenty-four hours. I called them up and went, “No way.” I said, “You have given me the biggest present I've ever received, saying that you thought that I was good enough...” “No, no, no, we know...” I said, “Yeah, that's great. Had this been twenty years ago, yeah—that would have been so cool. Now, my kids are in school, my family needs me, I'm building a welfare organisation, I'm working with people I've always wanted to work with—Jane Goodall, oh my God, she was my idol growing up—I'm making a difference and I can't see putting my life on hold to go and have some fun for the next year or so. It's nice, but I'm past the 'let's just take off from life and have fun' phase. I don't need this job, but there is somebody out there who does.” So, that's how I make my decisions. [Referring back to *The Laramie Project*] I don't know that Eric appreciated my decision, or even cared, because he never talked to me again.

IE: I talked to some people [about *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and the character of Mrs. Meers] and the general feedback was, “What's the big deal? It's a character, it's just drama.” But Eric's reaction was so extreme.

¹⁰⁵ *The Laramie Project*. Eric Ng directed this play for his own production company, Looking Glass Productions, in 2009.

¹⁰⁶ An international touring company performed *Cats* in Hong Kong from May 15 to June 14, 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Director and Conductor for *The Wizard of Oz*.

JJ: But he's an extreme person. That's sad because I think he's a nice person. I think he gets lost in all of his internal... stuff. [Comments withheld]¹⁰⁸

[Question and answer withheld due to narrator misunderstanding interviewer's question]

IE: Do you think it's just entertainment then?

JJ: I do. I do. If you're going to do a real life story, like what Eric was doing? It's entertainment, but it's to teach a lesson. *A Hundred Saints You Should Know*¹⁰⁹—that was to teach a lesson. It's a difficult show. Yes, it's a performance of real life drama. Did Mrs. Meers touch on something that probably was happening?¹¹⁰ Absolutely! Was it something that destroyed a people? No.[Comment withheld] People are trying to entertain for something good. If you don't want the entertainment, or you don't want to hear a possible lesson, then don't go. It's okay. We're not here to make a movement and start an uprising—okay, western women, you're going to start dressing up as Chinese women and you're going to start rounding up a bunch—a local Hong Kong people and you're gonna steal and... it's ridiculous. But that's the thing—it was ridiculous and we wanted to show people how people how fun and ridiculous it could be.

IE: Yeah. I remember watching *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and people were cheering. It was funny.

JJ: Oh yeah. When Bun Foo and Ching Ho come out and do their song—that was amazing. I remember them coming back and saying, “They really like us, this is real!” They were so excited. I said, “You guys thought I would be the star. *You're* the stars! I'm just the old lady, they want me to go away.” It was great. It actually put everybody else in a better light. They were better than Mrs. Meers from the word go. That's what people will hopefully take away from that. But everyone has a different... you can have a hundred people read the Bible, and you can get a hundred different opinions of what the Scripture says. No different here.

IE: That's very true. I think I'm done. Thank you for talking to me.

¹⁰⁸ Comments withheld to protect Eric's privacy.

¹⁰⁹ Written by Kate Fodor. Produced in Hong Kong by Twice as Good Productions, October 26-29, 2011.

¹¹⁰ The portrayal of Mrs. Meers embodied some of the racial stereotyping that was occurring in the U.S.

Appendix C

Alan M. Wong
Narrator

Iris Eu
Interviewer

March 8, 2012
6.30 pm, before *Yellow Face* rehearsal
at Spooky Hall, The Hong Kong Players rehearsal space
San Po Kong,
Hong Kong S.A.R., China

IE: Your name?

AW: My name is Alan Matthew Wong, I am twenty-six and will be twenty-seven in April. I've been here in Hong Kong for nine months. I came out here for entertainment.

IE: For entertainment?

AW: That raises a question mark. For most people it does. I spent the last eight years in L.A., including college. My acting career [in L.A.] was faltering for a little bit. My agency went under. I did a small film in the Philippines, so I travelled there and stopped by Hong Kong. It opened my eyes to the idea of being Eurasian in Asia. Being Eurasian in the States is different than being Eurasian in Asia. For the first time, I recognised that and thought, why not give that a look? I did some networking trips in Manila and Hong Kong, then decided in the end that I had to move to Hong Kong.

IE: Is this a temporary thing?

AW: This is... uh... Most likely it won't go longer than five years. I have no idea. Most people who've moved to Hong Kong end up telling me, "Yeah, I was just going to come out here for a year, and then the next thing I knew I had my permanent residency."¹¹¹ So I don't know how long [I'll be here]. As long as career opportunities continue to develop.

IE: Yeah, I hear that. Some people arrive just for a few years, and then they've been here for fourteen years.

AW: Exactly. I don't know what it is. I guess this city sucks you in.

IE: Yeah. What are you doing for work right now?

¹¹¹ Permanent Residency can be obtained if someone has been living and working continuously in Hong Kong for seven years, under most circumstances.

AW: I teach a lot of English and drama, for both international school students who speak English and also for local Hong Kong schools, [for example] Po Leung Kuk, one of the more public institutions. I teach drama classes for them too. It's a way to teach the students English. I act in this play called *Yellow Face*, I don't know if you've heard of it?

IE: No, I haven't. [Laughs]

AW: It's pretty sweet! You should come and check it out, come to some rehearsals some time. You should probably interview some people from there too, it's right up your alley. I also work with Calcarries Modeling Agency. They do pretty well. They send me out on model castings, but the main reason I work with them is for live event hosting. I used to host beauty pageants in L.A.

IE: Did you really?

AW: Yeah. Unfortunately.

IE: Did it pay well?

AW: Oh, yeah. It paid better than anything else.

IE: Okay then.

AW: It's like, okay, right?

IE: Yeah.

AW: I used to do live events—award shows, gala dinners, stuff like that. Here, I've done a couple of events now and I have a couple more coming up. The modeling agency books those events for me.

IE: How are you with languages?

AW: Ah.... *mmm sik gong Guongdonghua*.¹¹²

IE: That's pretty good already!

AW: No, no, no, my Cantonese is really not that good. *Wo de baba sik gong*, but *ngo mm sik*.¹¹³ There's English... my Mandarin is even worse. *Wo bu hui shuo*... which I think means, I like to speak Mandarin.¹¹⁴ [Joking] Nah, it means I can't speak. My Chinese isn't good. That's one of the things, actually, that I needed to take more seriously when I was deciding to come out here. I think there aren't enough English acting opportunities

¹¹² Cantonese for “I don’t know how to speak Cantonese.”

¹¹³ Cantonese for “My father knows how to speak, but I do not know how to speak [Cantonese].”

¹¹⁴ Mandarin for “I don’t know how to speak...”

for me to feel productive in that area. It's about making my own developments.

IE: Is acting what you want to do for a living?

AW: Acting is what I will do for the rest of my life. Whether it pays my bills or not, I can't tell you. I would love it if it ended up being my living, but there's a strong possibility that it won't be. If I don't do that, then I'll teach. I love teaching. I think I'm lucky enough to find two things that I really enjoy doing. I plan on doing both of them. Even if I'm a very, very lucky actor, and I'm working and getting paid, I still don't think I'll stop teaching, either. I'll probably do tutoring or drama classes on the side. I think those two things are going to be a part of my life.

IE: How long have you been acting?

AW: Does school stuff count?

IE: Anything. I guess when you got the bug.

AW: My first play was when I was six or seven, in second, third or fourth grade plays. I was Prince Eric in *The Little Mermaid*. No big deal. I wanted to be Sebastian, but this little motherfucker who was two years younger than me and tiny and cute as hell got Sebastian over me and I was just like...

IE: Gutted?

AW: I was so gutted. I was heartbroken. I was all upset. What was funny was my mom was the musical director of that show. I got cast as Prince Eric. Not till ten years later she told me, "Well, you really did audition for that really well." I'm still hurt by it. She told me, "So much so that we were thinking of making Ursula a male character so we could cast you there." That would have been ten times more traumatic and painful as a kid.

IE: What other roles have you played?

AW: A lot of chorus roles in high school. In plays like *Oliver*, *Pippin*, *West Side Story*. I took a break to play rugby for a couple years, during my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college. I told myself, "I'm not doing theatre in college." Fat chance. I did take a fine arts requirement, and thought, well I'm not taking anything else other than drama. I got drawn in, and a year later I was in *Candide* and then I did—actually another racially significant play—*The Mikado*.

IE: You did *The Mikado*?

AW: Yeah. Are you familiar with *The Mikado*? The Gilbert and Sullivan? All white people playing Japanese people.

IE: So you voluntarily chose to be in that play?

AW: It was the musical that season at my college and I auditioned for it. I was Poo-Bah, so they gave me a large role. I think *The Mikado* needs to be done very carefully. I don't think we did a great job of making sure we did it the right way, but I don't think we did the worst job. I think there have been much more offensive types of—

IE: Did you get a lot of flak for doing it?

AW: Yeah. I got some concerns from the Asian American student body at the school I went to. [The student body] was still very, very small and I was already an active member in that body. When they found out the school was doing *The Mikado*, everyone was up in arms.

IE: And then they found out you were in it.

AW: Yeah, well... they... They found out I was in it. One thing my director did—and I was in full support of, I think that was really great about it—he opened all rehearsals to anybody and once a week we had open hall meetings with anybody from the community who would like to come up and communicate with us about it. This was so that we could be aware of what offenses would be recognised and know how people might be offended, because sometimes people are offended in ways that not everybody is able to foresee. Ideally, we'd all be smart and intelligent enough to know exactly every wrong step, but my director was an older caucasian teacher and I, quite frankly, knew for a fact that he was not prepared to do the show in the most sensitive way. He asked me, “Alan, communicate with me, where are we going too far, what are we doing here?” Feeling like I had a say in where we tiptoed the line made it a safer project for me to be a part of. In the end, I wasn't offended by it, at all. But then again, I know people who were, just by the nature of the show. That was an interesting time.

IE: That makes you a musical—

AW: I am very much a musical theatre actor to begin with. *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*—I was Snoopy. I loved being Snoopy, that was so cool. After college, I started working on smaller television and film stuff. This is the first time I've been back on stage in a long time.

IE: You were born and grew up in the States?

AW: Uh-huh. California. I grew up in the Bay Area, by San Francisco. Hong Kong is so crazy to me.

IE: Really?

AW: Yeah. To me California is just so much slower, and I didn't realise it when I was in

California—I thought, “Oh, this is life.” I come out here and it's... [Whispers] what the fuck. I'm looking everywhere, it's so fast. But you can get a lot of stuff done in a day... to your body's detriment.

IE: Yeah. I was thinking about how to go about talking to you. When you ask somebody straight off, how do you identify yourself, they've already gone through a thought process, sometimes it's automatic, sometimes it depends on who they're talking to... and they want to say the “right” thing—

AW: You want to know how I would identify myself? If someone comes up to me out of nowhere, which happens to me a lot, because people can't tell what I am—people at airports sometimes won't let me through because I don't look like a Wong. It's weird that my name is... I never thought about it growing up, for me it didn't seem like my name was a stereotypically Chinese name. Obviously it is a Chinese name, so that's clear, but stereotypes are created by outside sources and I didn't realise when I was a kid that the outside world had chosen a name like mine—the last name of Wong—and used it to stereotype a body of people. I grew up and then Alan Wong became synonymous with a typical Chinese male before people would meet me. It's just really interesting, you know? I've gone through so much. Changing my character's name in the play is really interesting idea for me because in my life it's been, “Yes no yes no yes yes no no no, I don't know, change it yes, change it no.” Everyone has told me to change my name. My agent in L.A. said that I don't look like a Chinese male and that I would not get leading roles if that was my name. He said, “My friends would see your name and throw your head shots to the side before looking at your picture.” Fair enough. I come out here and my current casting agency wants me to change my name too, because they think I'll be more marketable as a caucasian. My teaching company wants me to change my name also, because they don't think Chinese parents want their kids to learn English from someone with the last name of Wong. They don't, right? I had to learn that. It's just an interesting thing.

I'm not answering your question. Basically when people ask me what I am, I tell them I am a complete mix. Something I used to say when I was younger—I don't know if I still say it—was, “I am 100% Chinese and 100% caucasian.” Mostly 'cause I got tired of answering the question and that would at least make people stop, right? I still believe that actually. I think it's not a matter of percentage for me, or a matter of splitting up my identity or splitting up my body, for Godssakes, or splitting up anything about me. It's not an either/or, and I think that was the thing I fought with most as a kid. My brother used to call me whitewashed. He had all Chinese friends, and I had all caucasian friends. I didn't even know what whitewashed meant till years later, but my brother would say, “You're totally whitewashed.”

IE: How old were you when you figured out what “whitewashed” meant?

AW: Probably fourteen or fifteen.

IE: That's quite late in the day for somebody living in the U.S.

AW: Yeah, but growing up in the San Jose, in the Bay Area, I had all ethnicities around me. I grew up with Hispanic best friends, Indian best friends, Korean or Vietnamese friends. I grew up with black friends. I grew up with white friends. I just was really lucky, I think. It's really rare to grow up in a place where it was colour-blind. Also, having parents who are two—later on I got less colour-blind—but growing up with one parent who's white and one parent who's Chinese—or anyone [who has] two parents who are different ethnicities—when you grow up in that situation, you automatically don't see race the way a child who grows up in a single ethnicity family would. 'Cause to me, my mom and my dad are my parents. There was no difference. Phenotypically, sure, they looked different, but I never saw that growing up.

IE: That was normal for you.

AW: Yeah! I grew up having two ethnicities around me all the time. I mean, God forbid, whatever I was, I had no idea. I was just a product of those parents. Later on, when you start to realise there was separation, it's kind of jarring for a lot of kids. Not just for multi-ethnic kids, [but also for] kids who grow up in a situation or community where there wasn't a lot of separation between ethnicities. The first time you realise there's animosity between ethnicities, or the first time you realise that there's differences, or perceived differences, or stereotypes, it's pretty... it's pretty jarring, you know? I think it's interesting, 'cause some people may grow up having tons of prejudices and I can equally understand how jarring it must be for them to realise that we're all the same. It's the same barrier they're breaking through, they're just coming from different directions. They grew up thinking that we're all different—that's a hard transition to come through, “Oh, we're all the same.” But from my side, I grew up thinking we're all the same, it was a hard barrier to break through to realise that people saw us as being different.

IE: When did you start becoming colour-aware?

AW: High school. Well... I have to take that back actually. When I was in grade school, I first went to a private school that was very caucasian. My brother and I made up 50 percent of the Asian population at this entire school, [which had students from] kindergarten through eighth grade. I went to this school from kindergarten to second grade. Actually, in those few years, I definitely started to realise race, because I started getting called “chink.” My best friend at the time, who was Hispanic—for no reason, I don't know what it was—started pulling his eyes back typically. That was when I started realising that they were trying to associate me with [a Chinese stereotype]. I didn't feel like I associated with one [race] or the other. To me I just felt like it was all part of everything. I remember getting ostracized at that school. I didn't get invited to birthday parties with other friends, and we were made fun of. My dad—God bless my dad—in his most infuriated and trying-to-make-a-point state, he walks in, in the middle of our second grade classroom. My teacher is teaching the kids [and my dad] said, “Alan, stand up.” So I stand up, and he started taking all this shit out of my desk and putting it in my bag. He's

taking my coat off the rack... he's taking me out of school. I didn't know, right? And then— [Suppresses laugh] I don't know if this is an Asian stereotype or not—he pulls out a spray cleaning bottle of some type of cleanser and starts cleaning the desk for them. It opened from the top—he cleaned the bottom, he cleaned the chair [Suppresses more laughter] —and the teacher is sitting there like, “What are you doing?” And he yanks me out of that school.

IE: Because he was so mad about—

AW: Yeah, because the principals wouldn't do anything about it. What they said was that, “Boys will be boys.” The reason why it was just boys—the racial issues were brought up by my parents and some other parents, along with some other parents who were bringing up sexist issues too. Girls were getting harassed. Not... I guess you don't put a gradation on being harassed. They were harassed, period.

IE: For being—

AW: For being girls, yeah. They were being treated poorly and being made fun of by a group of guys, these really popular guys. [The school's] response to both the racial and gender issues were, “Boys are going to be boys. They'll grow up.”

IE: Was this in the nineties?

AW: Yeah. This was probably in... 1998? 1997 or 1998, something like that. [My parents] took me out, put me in public school. [I] forgot about race. It just felt normal for the first time. Then I went to high school and then I started seeing the real split between my friends. I had multi-ethnic friends. There was a Hispanic kid, a black kid and two white kids. Then I had Asian friends. They just didn't mingle. That was the first time I started realising, oh, maybe I have to choose... this is weird... If this group of friends pissed me off or were mean to me, I could go to this group. And if this group were upset at me, I'd go to that group, right? But they never intermingled. My junior I spent with all the Asian kids, but my sophomore year I spent with my football friends. I guess around fifteen or sixteen was the first time—

IE: You know you sound really happy-go-lucky about it all?

AW: Yeah, I never got mad about it. I don't know why. It could be because my brother always got mad about it. He and I dealt with everything completely differently. He went as far towards his Asian group of friends as possible, and he never went back to hang out with any other ethnicities, and that's true to this day. He always called me whitewashed because I didn't do that. I always saw so much anger in him about it. Anger for things that, at the time I couldn't realise, were racially charged. It was [stuff] like not making the high school basketball team that was really upsetting to him. But no Asians made the basketball team, even the two Chinese brothers who were in [my brother's year] who were fucking amazing. They were really good. They left the high school to play for

another high school and beat our team. They didn't play basketball at my high school. My brother was just always, always—I felt, when I was younger—really enraged about it.

IE: Is he older than you?

AW: Yeah. Three years older. I think as a result, I took a very passive approach to it. Now, that changed when I got to college, because my brother wasn't around any more, so then I started taking up more of... I think I started creating my identity a little more, centred around being Asian American.

IE: Speaking of identity—

AW: Identity's a crazy thing. Iris, identity is fucking crazy. It can be whatever you want it to be. But then, the whole world sees something else, and it's like—

IE: It doesn't really matter then in the end, does it?

AW: [Exhales] I'd like to say it doesn't. I really would like to say it doesn't. But if the way that other people are going to treat you, or the other opportunities people are going to allot you, or the way you manoeuvre yourself within this world... if it didn't have to be connected to your identity, then no, it wouldn't matter. You see me for what you see me as, I could see myself for what I see myself as, who the fuck cares. But because it does affect what you do sometimes, I think it has to, at some point... I dunno... be understood. I think you have to understand who you are. And I still don't understand who I am.

IE: Is that why you act?

AW: Probably. A little bit. I act because I don't allow myself to experience certain emotions or certain degrees of those emotions because I like to keep myself even keel. It doesn't always work, right? But sometimes—for example on the most extreme end, a murderous character has a murderous instinct, or intent. Probably every human being, if pushed to the right level, could feel that. Not act on it, but could feel it. I think most of us choose not to allow ourselves to go that far. But when you act, you can go that far. Or if I'm too sheltered and I don't want to feel heartbroken, and I get really defensive with a girl, and try to hold back or don't expose myself, then I'm not going to a certain degree of that emotion. But if I'm in a play or if I'm acting, it's my job to explore that. I think acting allows me to explore parts of myself that I don't allow myself to explore in my real life.

IE: Has it got anything to do with finding out more about your own identity? Do you choose roles according to what it can do for you in terms of self-discovery?

AW: I haven't been lucky enough to choose roles yet. If I get to the point that I do, that will definitely be something I'm more interested in. At my stage in acting, it's not like I can turn down a lot of roles.

IE: You're talking about your professional acting career in L.A.

AW: Mm-hmm. Here, I chose this—well I didn't choose, I told him I wanted to do this role and I auditioned for it—but I knew from the very beginning that this play was something that I really wanted to be a part of.

IE: Why?

AW: Because it's the first thing that I've ever done that deals with the topics of concern in my real life. It's just such an interesting thing to play a character that is mistaken ethnically, who's an actor. I mean, the parallels are remarkable. He's an actor who's mistaken ethnically, and I'm an actor who's mistaken ethnically all the time. What's really, really interesting—and I'm sure that you've noticed this already—is that my character in the play gets mistaken for Asian, and me as a character in my life gets mistaken as caucasian. In reality, I myself am right in between. But I'm playing the other side—d'ya see what I mean? —I'm playing the other possibility of being mixed, which is to be My brother looks more Asian than me, I look more caucasian than he does—

IE: “What do you mean, “more Asian?””¹¹⁵ [Alan exhales and looks exasperated. Iris laughs] I'm just teasin' ya. That's fine, that's fine.

AW: No no no no no, 'cause that's a really valid question to be honest, Iris! Like that's... you've got me, I don't know what I mean. I guess what I would say is that, people—and it sucks that I use other people's perspectives to define our identities. It sucks, I wouldn't like to—but from what other people have always said, they've always said, “He [Alan's brother] looks Asian/Chinese, I look caucasian.”

IE: In comparison?

AW: In comparison. I don't know. I can show you pictures and you can tell me whether he looks more Asian or not. I myself usually get mistaken for a caucasian and for the first time I get to see what it feels like to be mistaken for an Asian.

IE: Well, how do people react to you? When they meet you, what do they throw at you?

AW: I've gotten a lot of weird things. I've gotten Mediterranean.

IE: Really?

¹¹⁵ I am quoting a line from the play *Yellow Face*, where DHH is desperate to find a masculine Asian leading actor for his play *Face Value*, in order to save his own face after the *Miss Saigon* fiasco. Marcus (the role Alan played) has just auditioned for DHH, and a conversation ensues between DHH, Stuart Ostrow (producer) and Miles Newman (casting director) about the appropriateness of Marcus' appearance for the role. Stuart asks, “Does he look Asian to you?” at which point DHH becomes very defensive and replies, “What do you mean, “look Asian?” The scene can be read on pages 20-22 of the *Yellow Face* script.

AW: Yeah. It was actually at a casting and they didn't know what... because they had ethnic blocks. They had Asian. Latino. African American. Some of them are more clearly distinct. Then they had Mediterranean. They didn't know where—they would not put me in the caucasian one, they wouldn't put me in the Asian one—so someone was like, you're going to go with the Mediterraneans. The Mediterraneans. [Under his breath] ... What the fuck?

IE: It's like those boxes that you have to tick.

AW: Yeah. I wrote a monologue on those boxes. It's called “The Other Box.” Yeah.

IE: That would be interesting to read.

AW: I would love to show it to you some time. I actually made a documentary, a small film about it. I should show people. I fucking hate the other box. It's so separated from all the other ethnicities. I like being able to check multiple boxes—that's what I would prefer—but for a long time, they did not allow you to check multiple boxes, you could only check the other box if you weren't these. [Bangs four times on table] What the fuck is “other?” That's not like you, that's not like them; that not... I'm just... nondescript. If anything, being mixed should allow me to feel more descript. Putting me in a nondescript box just sucks. A lot.

You asked, how do people perceive me? Or how to people—

IE: When you're here, how do people react to you, as opposed to how they react in L.A.?

AW: Here, actually, it's much more understood at a glance that I'm mixed. Exactly what I'm mixed with, maybe not so much, but in L.A.—I don't know if it was the quality of intelligence that you find in L.A., or maybe inexperience or—I don't know what it was, but in L.A. it just came down to, “What are you? Like, what the fuck are you?”

IE: Would people actually say that?

AW: “What are you.”

IE: So they would meet you and that would be the first thing coming out of the blocks?

AW: Not all the time, but I would say more often than not, that question or a variation of it would come up in the first conversation I would have [with them].

IE: Okay. What about here?

AW: Here it's different, I think people... See, what was interesting was that in L.A. people would always ask. Here I think people assume before asking. Maybe it's a cultural difference, but they're less likely to ask and [will just] assume. The assumption is not

always correct. Sometimes they make the assumption that I'm half Chinese, most of the time they make the assumption that I'm completely caucasian. I guess in L.A., they could tell that something was kind of off about me, like I don't look like the perfectly caucasian—I hate those fucking words, “perfectly caucasian” —but I guess I don't look like that, so they know something's different, so they're just curious. Here in Hong Kong, I think they just kind of... It's refreshing because they don't care as much about what exactly I am.

IE: Are these—I'm generalising here, but—local Chinese that you are talking about?

AW: Yep. More so local experiences, mostly obviously with individuals who don't speak as much English and I don't speak enough Cantonese, to communicate perfectly well [with each other]. Again, maybe I don't know, right? There's a large possibility that I don't have a great idea of what they're thinking. Based on interaction, that's what I get. From more expat communities, I'd say they don't assume, it's a little bit more like L.A. where if they don't know, they'll ask, but I haven't been asked that much because I think most people figure it out pretty quickly. Maybe it's just that the expat community [in Hong Kong] has a lot of experience with multi-ethnic individuals. Eurasian is just a much more common theme or topic that's talked about or presented out here than it is in L.A. or in California. I'm sure there are more of us out here. Maybe not, I'm not sure. Not more than Hawaii though. God, we conquered Hawaii. I wanna move to Hawaii.

IE: Have you ever been?

AW: Yeah, multiple times.

IE: Did you like it?

AW: I like Hawaii. I like Maui. So yeah, it has been a little different.

IE: Right. What about specifically being male in all of this? I remembered when we were sitting out there and we were talking.¹¹⁶ Eric¹¹⁷ and you mentioned about these Asian girls in the States who would not go out with Asian guys, who would only go out with white guys. Now, I've only read about this, I didn't think they actually existed...

AW: Oh no, this is really true actually.

IE: Is it true across the board?

AW: Nah, I think we can't generalise it. It's probably not as prevalent as we made it out to be when we were talking about it, but it's definitely there. It's a really interesting cross

¹¹⁶ Before and after rehearsals for *Yellow Face*, we would often sit in the green room and talk about the themes in this play. It was on one previous occurrence that this discussion took place.

¹¹⁷ Eric Ng, director of *Yellow Face*, who also performed as DHH's father, HYH. He is also my first interviewee for this thesis.

section, gender and race. And economic status and the poverty line, they all intersect in a very intricate, crazy bird nest [pattern]. If we're just going to talk about ethnicity and gender, specifically Asian ethnicity and male gender, the Asian male has been emasculated in entertainment, and I know this is a topic you're all involved with, when it comes to your work right now. He's been completely emasculated, it's only now just starting to change slightly with... I think his name is Daniel Kim? The Korean in *Hawaii 5-0* and *Lost*. He is not a meek or weak or feeble character, which is really, really refreshing to see in entertainment. Despite that, obviously, you get a very strong stereotype with Asian males. Now, I think the stereotypes are there for Asian females too. They're just different and they're equally as damaging. You have this—I can't stand this Sino-fanatical push for caucasian males to wanna date someone exotic, I don't want to get into that too much—but let's just say that Asian females have been exoticised as concubines, as exotic women on island-y looking beaches with coconut shells and leis. It's just become a very sexual thing, which is so funny, because that is and a hundred and eighty degree turn from where the Asian male stereotypes have become, because the Asian male has been emasculated. His sexuality has been stripped. Completely. That's so crazy that they're exact opposite ends. The Asian male is not strong, not assertive, is not... and this is just all in entertainment, I know you know I'm not saying this, but it's how we're portrayed. He's portrayed as weak. He's portrayed as really smart, so that's great, right? Stereotypes work in all different directions. What's really weird is that being mixed and being male has a whole different set of feelings, because now I'm smack dab in between two archetypes. It has to do with the fact that I'm tall and my body is large. Parts of me speak towards what Hollywood has portrayed as this leading, debonair, white male. Parts of me are pulled to the Asian, stereotypical, emasculated male. If you would ask me where I would wanna be in this, I would want to be right here. [Bangs twice on table to emphasise the words and indicate the middle] I would want to play roles right in the middle. I don't wanna play this, and I don't wanna play this, right? [Indicates left and right.] There's not any space here, for acting. There's starting to be more [space], but the closest thing I can think of is... Keanu Reeves? He tapped into the area right here, close to the leading male, but not quite. He definitely hasn't gotten over here, closer to the Asian stereotype. This is a very empty space when it comes to roles or work, because you can find these, they're very stereotypical, and if you look the part, you can find these. [Taps on table to indicate left and right sides] But where is the—

IE: In your professional life, have you ever been subject to this kind of stereotype, where if somebody looks at you and think that you're Asian...yeah... Personally I'm not comfortable with the term Asian, because it doesn't mean—

AW: Yeah, it's very nondescript also. “Asian”... yeah... it's a sticky topic.

IE: Yeah, it is a sticky topic, but I don't want to get stuck on the words—

AW: That's fine, I just want to say, I completely understand your... uncomfortableness with that term, and it crossed my mind a couple of times as I was going over this, if I was using the proper terminology.

IE: Yeah.

AW: And no, I wasn't. Point blank, right? But I used the term Asian because that is most likely—

IE: To be understood?

AW: —how I would be classified in the States. They very seldom ask, “Are you part Chinese?” They ask, “Are you part Asian.”

IE: Yeah I know.

AW: And it's just... it sucks and that's how I grew up. I would love to be in a world where someone could look at me and say, “Oh, are you half Chinese, maybe from the Guangzhou region?” I'd be like, “Fuck, yeah, man, good call!”

IE: But does it even bother you that people have to describe your... blood?

AW: Yeah. Yeah! I wish it didn't even have to matter, right? That would be the most ideal. We're getting closer to that—the more and more mixed everybody gets, eventually you're not going to have enough patience to go, “Oh, okay, I'm one-eighteenth Cherokee, two-eighteenth Chinese, I'm this much caucasian. Nobody wants to plot a list, and next thing you know people are going to have a literal breakdown or pie chart. Hopefully we get to the point where it doesn't matter. We're not there yet. We're not close enough to that point yet. I would like to be, I think. Entertainment for sure isn't, because entertainment doesn't like to be... in the grey area. Good entertainment does and it blows people's minds, but the majority of the entertainment that makes money—the big blockbusters and stuff like that—they want to present specific archetypes that the public recognises.

IE: So when you were watching films or television, and you see a stereotypical example... I don't want to give you too updated examples...

AW: What about *Sixteen Candles*? Do you remember? [Eric comes in. Alan asks Eric] What was the character's name in *Sixteen Candles*?

EN: Long Duk Dong.

AW: Yeah, Long Duk Dong. Let's pick another one. Um...

IE: The one I'm thinking of is... but they're all old musical types. Have you ever seen *Thoroughly Modern Millie*? How about the dude in *Heroes*?

AW: Yeah. His name is Hero, right, Hero Nakamura? Or we could talk about the new guy

who's in *The Hangover*. He's been in a bunch of stuff. Also in *Community*.¹¹⁸ In my mind—lot of people think too—he's taking Chinese actors back generations. He's regressing.

IE: Even if you watch an old movie and you see something like Fu Machu you see that kind of stereotypical—

AW: Like the Charlie Chan type—

IE: Yes, either the Charlie Chan or the Fu Manchu type, how does that make you feel? And do you think, oh that's me, or do you think that's how people see me? Does that get to you? Does that get to your... it's really awkward for me to ask, but does that get to your manhood? Does that get to your masculinity?

AW: It's okay. Uh, yes. 100 percent it gets to me. And when I see it, it um... it's hard to explain, because... I think when people see me, they don't see that, because of my mixed heritage. I think I feel inside—in terms of what my identity is and how I believe myself—more like that caricature than people see me as. I think it's because my dad, and my Gong Gong (my grandfather) and my Poh Poh—I know Poh Poh is on your mother's side but I call my dad's mother Poh Poh—and my uncles and my aunts on that Chinese side... I never saw myself as being that different from them. So when I see them... that's what hurts the most when I see those caricatures, because that's my family they're talking about, my family that they're portraying. It sucks because someone out there is seeing those images and not questioning it. Someone out there is seeing those images and... they wouldn't be putting those images out there if it didn't ring true for a huge population of people. So I think that even says more about—whether we're talking about American entertainment, the American population, or whether we're talking about entertainment in other places, European entertainment or Chinese entertainment, whatever it is—those images that are being put out there because somebody sees that as being true. What the fuck does that say about who we are as a people? That's really unfortunate. I want one day for all of those images and those caricatures to be gone.

I remember growing up with a Chinese restaurant called Mr. Chow's. Chinese fast food. There was nothing Chinese about this food, except for the fact that it had broccoli and beef put together. And it had this song. “This! That! Eggrolls for the finger lickin' lovers!” The image [the restaurant used] was just like what we were talking about—big ass triangle hat, long skinny black moustache—no eyeballs... What the fu... they don't think Chinese people have eyeballs! Do you understand what I mean?

IE: [Laughs] What, you mean like, no whites to the eyes?

AW: When they just draw a line, and the actual cartoon characters, they just have lines [for eyes]. I don't know if [those images have] come out here before, or... Chinese people have eyeballs, Goddamn it! It's just remarkable that they think they don't. It's intense.

¹¹⁸ Ken Jeong.

There's such a strong history of treating... and I know we don't like the term "Asian" but... To me, when Asian and American are put together, it talks about more than being just Chinese. It talks about more than being just Japanese. It talks about an Asian American experience. And no, not all Asian Americans went through the Japanese internment camps. But not all Asian Americans went through prejudice when building the railroads or during the Chinese Exclusion Act.

I want to tell you an interesting story, about my name. My family came over here three or four generations ago during a period called the Chinese Exclusion Act in America. I know you know about this. I'm sure you're familiar with the term "Paper son, Paper daughter?" During the Chinese Exclusion Act, if you were Chinese you could only come into America if you were family, if you were blood related to people in the States already. Chinese families in the States started selling their last name and family information to people in Hong Kong and China, so that they could take those names and migrate to the United States and say that they were family. So my last name's not Wong. It's not my real last name. My great-great grandfather purchased that last name to get to the United States. My last name's actually Leung.

IE: So you know this? You're just full of surprises, aren't you?

AW: People don't know this! I think that Wong is a very, very popular last name—Wong, Lee, Chan—super popular Chinese last names, in China also, right? But I have this sneaking suspicion—I've been telling it to people, and I have no idea if it's correct or not—but I think that there are certain last names that are more popular Chinese last names in the United States than are statistically popular in Hong Kong or China, because there were more purchased names. A lot of Wongs that I've talked to—not a lot, but some—also know that Wong isn't their actual last name. It's crazy.

IE: Yeah it is slightly.

AW: The only reason that any of that is true is because there was a period when America said, "I'm sorry, but if you're Chinese, then you can't come into our country."

IE: It's kind of leaning that way again.

AW: Yeah. No no no, towards—I think the number one thing is—mostly towards Mexicans. I wrote a paper back in college about how Angel Island and Ellis Island were the two docking stations during the Chinese Immigration Act, and then I equated those islands to the Mexican-American border that they're militarising, building up, putting machine guns, targets and all kinds of crazy shit on that border, because, again, they don't want foreigners to immigrate in. But, I'm sorry, who built this... that country? My great-great-great grandfather—the first one to come over—he literally did build part of the railroads, you know? When people see me, they think I'm caucasian, or they think I'm white, right? But I have family who've been through all of the things, just like someone else who's full-blooded Chinese, I have family who've dealt with the same racial slurs,

they've dealt with the same oppression, they've dealt with those times in America, so I strongly associate with Chinese culture in a way that's much more strong than how people see... I'm much more Chinese than how people see me. I feel more Chinese than anyone will ever see me as, and that's really interesting, right? Because now I'm playing a white guy, who wants to be Chinese. [This show] just has a lot of interesting cross-sections of all this different stuff.

IE: No kidding. I think we're going to have to stop it here. Thank you.

Appendix D

Keon Woong Lee
Narrator

Iris Eu
Interviewer

March 6, 2012
at Shing Mun River Promenade
Hong Kong S.A.R., China

IE: If you could state your name and age for the record please?

KL: Keon Woong Lee, 31, born in 1980.

IE: Could you give me a quick rundown of your background? Where you were born, where you grew up, where you went to school?

KL: I am South Korean, born in Korea. I came to Hong Kong when I was four years old, and studied here all throughout my primary school and secondary school education. I went to international schools, Beacon Hill School and Shatin College. They're both part of the English Schools Foundation here in Hong Kong. For university, I studied for a year abroad at Royal Holloway, part of the University of London. I was reading English Literature and Drama as a double major. Unfortunately I couldn't continue my studies there after the first year because of financial reasons. I delayed my studies for a year, went to live in Korea where I made money, and then I went to study at The University of Hong Kong, studying English Literature and Comparative Literature. Unfortunately I didn't study drama there, because they didn't offer it at the time.

IE: So you were a double major in English Literature and Comparative Literature?

KL: Yep. After that, I did my master's degree at HKU in English Literature, but I studied American texts. I completed that in 2005. During my undergraduate studies at HKU, I started working for a drama company here in Hong Kong called Faust International Limited. I started out as an assistant teacher there, then I became a Group Leader—a drama teacher, basically. It went from part time work to full time work, and I worked there full time for seven years—no, six... I think it was—at least six years. It was a long time, at any rate. I've been teaching English and Drama for the past two years—still working part time at Faust—but also at local schools. I'm currently a drama teacher at Baptist Sha Tin Wai Lui Ming Choi Primary School in Sha Tin teaching primary school kids.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Since September 2013, Keon has worked as General Manager at Faust International Ltd.

IE: Would you say that you have no formal theatre training?

KL: The most formal training I've had was when I was studying Drama at Royal Holloway. I intended for that to be my major but life got in the way, so that was my only formal training. Since then, I've continually developed myself by doing workshops and involving myself in drama projects where I can. I've learnt a lot—as an assistant, by working backstage at various shows and performing in various shows and various parts.

IE: Before I get onto the show *Yellow Face*, I want to ask you a bit more about—well, what you were talking about, the fact that you don't really have that much formal training. What do you think is the difference between an amateur actor and a professional actor? Do you think there is any difference?

KL: Not really. In Britain—I know the British model quite well, just because I studied there for a little bit and from various books I've read—and in Australia, there's definitely a path. You go to drama school. There are specific schools where you then get cast in... BBC productions, Australian Broadcasting Corporation—you get trained and you know how to get roles in those types of shows. You could be in a modeling agency and get auditioned for a role and become a professional actor that way. The difference for me is—technically, a professional gets paid, right? —but there are a lot of workshops out there where you can get a lot of professional level training and you can still be an amateur actor and not get paid [for acting].

IE: Do you think that the amateur versus professional label hints at the quality of the acting?

KL: Oh, yeah, yeah, definitely. If you're known as an amateur actor, the label gives you the stigma of somebody who's not... who might not be as good as a professional actor.

IE: Is that just a stereotype?

KL: Definitely. I mean, obviously, a professional actor does that full-time and is paid, so they should be better. That's not always the case. You can't really tell, especially in Hong Kong. You can get really great actors, I think you can tell the difference in the quality of the direction and the production more than by the actors sometimes. Just... all that... labels... nnaaa... I don't really care about all that.

IE: Okay. Can you explain to me a bit more about your technique of developing a character, from the moment—for example, we don't have to talk about this particular show—but just in general, when you have a part, how do you develop it?

KL: Well, uh... [Laughs] It's hard to say because there are so many... For me personally, I really haven't done enough roles to identify a clear process, but what I would do is obviously to learn the lines. I like to get really physical about the character, in that I like to get dressed as the character as soon as I can and feel the physicality of it as soon as I

can. Obviously, if the role requires research then I would do that. This is actually the first time where I felt like I needed to do proper research because it's based on a real character, based on the playwright himself, David Henry Hwang. Whereas for all the other [parts I've performed]—I played “Evil Capitalist South Korean General” to “Man Who Turns Into A Goldfish,” to “Wordless Chinese Man” —and none of those really required research, they just required very recognisable human characteristics, some of them exaggerated and some of them fairly realistic. This is the first time where I had to think a little bit more carefully about what's already known about the character, whereas the others, it's just borne out of how I wanted to take it and what choices I made to bring that role into life.

IE: As an aside, do you think that a kind of play that's based on real events is a weaker type of play?

KL: Not at all. It's just a different type of play and presents a different set of challenges. I've done a play where I improvised on stage a mad, bloodthirsty doctor, based on commedia dell'arte. That was completely borne out of base human instincts and exaggeration and commedia dell'arte movements. That was very challenging for me because I got to act out this crazy character and I'm improvising on stage in front of an audience. That presents a different type of acting challenge [compared] to acting as someone that other people would definitely recognise.

Having said that, I'm still early on in the rehearsal process [for *Yellow Face*] and I'm finding that I can't be bound to... I'm not going to imitate exactly like David Henry Hwang and he himself, in the play, he's still a character. I'm not out to shoot and replace David Henry Hwang and insert myself into his life. I'm there to be a character in this play and to serve the story. In serving the story, I think the character is a lot more energetic and he's certainly... The way David Henry Hwang portrays him, he's not always sympathetic. Watching a few interview clips, I can get certain cues but I have to make choices based on... take whatever I can from those interviews and create my own version of David Henry Hwang, obviously under the direction of the director and making sure that it fits in with what the director wants.

Side bar: I think the director's vision is so important in a theatre piece and film, because you're there to serve the story, but you're also there to serve the director. That's one of my strongest beliefs, actually, as an actor. You can certainly collaborate, of course, but ultimately you're there to serve the director... and I can't believe I'm saying this. Eric...

IE: [Laughs] We can play this back to Eric.

KL: Yeah, yeah. Obviously I can have very strong opinions, but you need to follow what the director says. That's a long winded way of saying “no.”

IE: Now that we're talking specifically about this role of DHH in *Yellow Face*, is there a percentage of the character that you're developing... how much of it is imitation, how

much of it is something you've invented and how much of it is something that you've drawn from your past history or something you've experienced in your life?

KL: Percentage-wise, I think it's still in flux at this stage of the process. Honestly, I don't... DHH as the character in the play and from what I know about him from my research feels like a role that I can identify with. Here is someone from an Asian background who is transplanted into a different location where he is definitely seen as a minority. Now, I grew up in Hong Kong and there are Chinese and Asian faces everywhere, so it's not the same, but the idea of being from another culture and put into a foreign land, even if it doesn't seem that foreign [is still there]. I still remember when I was growing up I would visit Korea, and the older I got I saw more differences than similarities. I feel like I don't have to work that much in understanding his frustrations. Living in Hong Kong, I don't experience the same level of racism or [have] conversations about being Asian American and [about] race. It's all a very different context here, but I can definitely relate to the "outsider" status, I guess. When I think back to my being in international school, I never felt any racism towards me, but I knew that my background and my culture was not the dominant one. There was one time where one of my classmates mentioned something about dogs and asked if I ate dog, and I had no idea what he was talking about! He saw something or heard something and then repeated it back to me. I even had a teacher tell me, "Hey I heard that Koreans were the Irish of Asia." I had no idea what that meant—I didn't know how to take it—I was like, "...what?" Whereas I could tell from the experience in the play that David Henry Hwang experienced something a little bit more—you know—rude. Intentionally rude.

IE: Tell me a bit more about your experiences growing up in international school. I definitely think that international school kids are a breed of their own. Let's talk about secondary school. How was the racial divide? How many people were expatriate/western/caucasian?

KL: I think nowadays there are more local Chinese kids or Asian kids in international schools. There's even a new school now in the New Territories—I forget the name of it, Renaissance College, I think—where it's actually half a local school and half an international school. Back in my day—which is not that long ago—it was definitely where 70% [of students] were white / other [non-Asian races], and I was in the minority twenty to thirty percent. In my class there were three other kids who were Asian. Then there were the Eurasian kids, but the ones that I knew were definitely brought up more in their western / specifically American background, rather than as Chinese.

IE: When did you become race conscious and how did it come about?

KL: You see for me, I don't think I've ever been discriminated against. I've been accused of being stupid of course, or I've been treated badly by people who think I'm dumb, but I've never been directly discriminated against. I never became aware of race directly or personally or negatively towards me. I think I've become more aware through my reading and newspapers and culture of how the world doesn't operate that way. I grew up in Hong

Kong. When I went to England, where you'd think I might experience that sort of stuff, I went to a school near London and there were a lot of international school students. Actually, the kids who were looked down upon were the American kids because they didn't know how to handle their drink. The British kids knew what to drink, what level to stop at, and the American kids just drank in excess. I fell in with a group of really great people who just accepted me for who I was. It helped that there was another member of the group who was Korean herself. She was half-Korean and half-English, so it was not like I was a big surprise. People were cool about it.

IE: Growing up, when you spoke about your classmates, when you looked at the cliques—I'm not even talking about discrimination, but when did you start looking at a person and thinking, oh that person is white? Or did you never even consider differentiating people like that when you were growing up in school?

KL: You know what, when I went to Korean school and it ate away an entire half of my Saturday when my friends were out and about—when I got angry over that, that's when I became really race conscious. I was like, “Goddamn it! Being a minority means I have to attend more school!” That might seem like a really glib answer, but ... yeah, I tended to focus on the negative side. [My school] was such a mix—Indian, American, British—that we were all different, and whoever was cool, was cool, and whoever was not, was not. I definitely saw myself as not being cool, not because I was Korean but because I thought I was a dork. It was dork-ism, not racism.

IE: I guess we'll leave it there for now. Thank you. We'll keep going next time.

**May 3, 2012
at La Kaffa, City One Plaza
Hong Kong S.A.R.**

IE: So, it's after the show now. Have you had time to reflect on playing the role [of DHH]? When I last talked to you, I asked you about the process and the character, and you told me you weren't far enough in the process of developing the character to really know the nuances of the character. So how did you feel on stage?

KL: [Laughs] First of all, I feel like I survived. After that, this character... the more I play it, the more I appreciate how the author wrote about himself, because it's not a flattering portrayal. The epiphany that he gets at the end, it is on one level very narcissistic and he ends up admitting he's a writer, and “everything's always all about me.” When I first read that, I didn't quite get it. I didn't get what that meant. Okay... I understood what he said, but it didn't hit me... the impact—this is all about face, about looking good, about people creating faces for themselves and hiding behind it. DHH the character, he thinks this is all for a good cause—everything he talks about, being Asian American, standing up for your beliefs and having good representations of Asians in the media. But he realises he was hiding behind that, and in the second half, he just hides, not willing to confront the

consequences of his actions. When we were doing the run, I felt the rollercoaster ride of being completely poised, completely knowing what to say, standing clearly. The Tony Awards speech at the beginning is like he's a man who had beliefs—honourable beliefs—and stands for them and then he just loses his way. When we started doing the longer rehearsals of the whole run, I think I got the character more. I got him as this complete person who is at first actively standing for something. Once that stance is attacked or becomes unclear or morally grey, everything's become slippery, and he just slips, slips and slips, until finally at the end he admitted, "I caused this mess."

IE: It's quite man of him to stand up and claim responsibility.

KL: Yes, it's a very brave thing. There are people who spend all their energy avoiding looking bad, avoiding responsibility for their actions. They don't want to be blamed for anything. They don't want to be thought bad of. It's really interesting, in terms of your thesis, in terms of masculinity—I only realised how it was the relationship, the triangle with Marcus and Leah—also it didn't really click just how much of that is about his masculinity and how much this white guy in the play has taken away DHH's role so completely. He speaks like him and everything, but it didn't really click until I saw him taking over his ex-lover, and it becomes, "Oh, this shit's gettin' real," y'know what I mean? It took me that physical presence when they're making out and I'm watching from afar, going "This is making me really uncomfortable." Did I get that as well, because that was a dimension that I wasn't present to until after all of this.

IE: Was that uncomfortableness something based on your character feeling like somebody else is going with his ex-girlfriend, or was it more than that, that it was specifically this guy that had taken over?

KL: Yeah yeah. Because he's taking over his words—his words have been taken away from him, and now his relationships, his physical, emotional relationships. That Leah scene, the director actually pushed to want it to feel authentic, and he really wants us to feel... I found it really odd that he wants that, there's not much about their relationship [in the play]... they don't talk very much about their relationship apart from one or two points.

IE: You mean Marcus and Leah.

KL: No, DHH and Leah. He really wanted to make [us] really attack each other when we shouted at each other. There's a lot of emotions going on that's not... that I wasn't present to until we were really pushed.

IE: It's good to be pushed, right?

KL: Yeah yeah yeah. That's the director's job! "It's not enough! Make it real!" [Laughs]

IE: What are the themes of identity that come up in *Yellow Face* for you?

KL: How we do actually craft our own identity. At the end, DHH says he found this mask, and that it fit comfortably, probably better than anything else he's ever tried. But it is a mask that he created. He did not find this mask lying on the floor, you know? He created this mask himself. As his job as a writer, you're constantly creating characters. For me it's about actively creating your own identity. Of course, there's always the background of, "This is your cultural heritage, this is what other people say you are, this is what you're expected to be in your own culture," but DHH, as a character, does... He went out there, he spoke for Asians. It's just losing sight of that, I feel like the theme is very much like you need to be aware that that is something you're creating and it's not just this construct that's there to hide behind.

IE: Thank you.

Appendix E

Alan Wong
Eric Ng
Kathy Wu
Keon Woong Lee
Lester Ryan Clark
Rye Bautista
Shafin Azim
Stephen Bolton
Narrators

Iris Eu
Interviewer

April 22, 2012
at Spooky Hall, The Hong Kong Players' rehearsal space
San Po Kong,
Hong Kong S.A.R., China

Alan Wong	- AW
Eric Ng	- EN
Kathy Wu	- KW
Keon Woong Lee	- KL
Lester Clark	- LC
Rye Bautista	- RB
Shafin Azim	- SA
Stephen Bolton	- SB

IE: How are you feeling about the play now, Keon? Are you happy with your character?

KL: How am I feeling... I think everything's come together pretty well.

IE: [This is a question for] anybody. From before you did this play to now, how much more aware of Asian American issues are you? Alan and Eric are exceptions because they know all about it—

AW: No, but even knowing about a certain amount of Asian American [issues], I still learned a lot from the show. I didn't know about the Wen Ho Lee stuff. I mean, I knew who he was but I didn't know the details. Or the campaign finance scandals. I hadn't even heard of a character named Marcus Gee. And now I've heard of him. So it's awesome.

IE: 'Cause you're playing him!

KL: [Stage whisper] And he's not real!

IE: That's the thing, though—I was thinking about this this morning, the fact that Marcus Gee isn't real... Doesn't that—

KL: You're thinking that it invalidates the story?

IE: Yeah.

KL: No. I know it initially presents itself like an autobiography, but I don't think there's anything in the publicity that says that it has autobiographical elements to it. A lot of plays have autobiographical stuff, we just don't know about it. I don't think it invalidates it, it just tells a story that David Henry Hwang wanted to [tell].

IE: That's true, but the way he wrote it—for example, the Announcer, who's literally... The whole time he's just announcing facts, dates, so it makes it very much a—

AW: A documentary, almost.

IE: Yeah.

KL: It would be interesting to see how many people think this is all real. How much the audience is willing to swallow about Marcus Gee.

AW: We kind of sucker punch them in the end. Which is a good thing. [Unclear]

IE: I just think that the main character being called the name of the author, and in the end he comes out and confesses that he made things up. I just don't know if that works against what it's supposed to—

KL: I read in one of the recent interviews with David Henry Hwang that he wants audiences to leave with questions and discuss about identity. I think the way the play wraps up, it does make everybody question, well, is there anything wrong with a white guy wanting to be Asian?

AW: No. [Unclear] Not from my character's point of view.

IE: No, from your point of view.

AW: [Unclear]

KL: I think it legitimately makes people argue. If people get defensive about that, where does that defensiveness come from? Do we really strictly want to have our own borders and barriers and say, “I am clearly this person and you're not, and you cannot ever be that person?”

AW: We can put ourselves in a bunch of boxes to separate us from each other, but “what good would that do the community?”¹²⁰ [Unclear] We're just separating ourselves. [Unclear]

KL: This is specifically an American thing, because for me, all the literature I see about America is [that] you come in, you can make yourself, you can be... you can start with nothing and create whatever. See, that's the rhetoric.

AW: That's the American Dream. [Unclear]

KL: Yeah. To see it in racial terms, it's kind of interesting, because people do segregate. For me, it seems the Americans are white Americans, then there's Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans... There has to be some sort of signifier to say, well, they're American but they're originally from this place, so they can't be just called “American”.

AW: I think we're looking at what it really means to be American. What's so interesting to me is because so many people—Americans, as well as non-Americans—will say [to me], “You're half Chinese?” And I'll say, “Yes, my dad is Chinese.” And they'll say “So your mom's American?” Well, fuck, my dad is also American! They're both born in America. The idea that “American” and “caucasian” are synonymous is not something that people are actively trying to think but it's something that's ingrained already in the way we talk about nationality and ethnicity. It's really funny, because this assumption goes across all ethnic lines. All my Latino students—all Mexican... actually, there were a few El Salvadorian and one Guatemalan—in East L.A., they were the ones [who would] most commonly be like, “So you're half Chinese and half American.” I mean, no. What do you consider yourself? That's what I want to ask them, what does that mean about how they perceive their own identity, if they're looking at me and saying, “half American means half white.” So what do they think, do they think they're American? I'm sure they think they're American, right, but their idea of what “American” means is just... without even thinking, it automatically is “caucasian.” I think for a lot of people, not everyone. Iris once upon a time asked me, is there a problem with the white guy wanting to be Asian—

LC: Can I say one thing. One thing that I find really really interesting is how this idea—that in America you can be anything no matter who you are—is mirrored by DHH's dad. So HYH and also Marcus are doing the exact same thing.¹²¹

IE: Yeah, but one ends up being fake and the other one ends up dying and having his dreams broken.

¹²⁰ A line said by Marcus Gee in *Yellow Face*, in the scene where DHH asks Marcus to come clean about his real race, in order to discredit the effort by American authorities to find evidence of external Chinese influence during the 1996 campaign finance controversy. Please refer to David Henry Hwang, *Yellow Face*, 59.

¹²¹ DHH's father talks about his American dream of being like big films stars like Humphrey Bogart. Ibid., 17.

AW: But did he die because he wanted to be American.

IE: No, he died because he had cancer—

LC: No, wait a minute, wait a minute. In the first part of the play, in HYH's big speech, he talks about [how] “I'm just like that girl!” and he says, “that's why she kills herself.” What was it? “If you see what your life is and it's not where you want it to be, then what's the point?”¹²²

AW: So does he give up on the [cancer] treatment because he's disappointed in American society—

LC: He had the option... Yeah, because... that was his big speech. To me, that's what I'm thinking happened.

IE: It was a funny coincidence that he puts the two together, he is dying of cancer and gives up on having the treatment, but he also says, “I've given up on my American Dream of being Clark Gable.”¹²³

RB: I think what he did, working to build his life and making something out of himself is [his way] of living the American dream. He could live the easy life, but he wanted to be there, he wanted a place inside that society, he wanted to be accepted as an American. That's why he wanted to build a life that was valid [by American standards so he could] be called an American. It was probably living a type-A kind of life that gave him cancer, so when everything else was like... Fine, I don't need this life any more, giving up on all the treatment and—

AW: Everything he worked for.

KL: But at the same time, the play ends with DHH's carrying the torch. “That's what happens after your dad dies, you make his dream your own.”¹²⁴ Even though HYH dies, his son is going to carry on with that legacy, probing and looking at it and making sure that it stays alive, that Chinese Americans are accepted. DHH is still out there writing and commenting—he commented on the Jeremy Lin stuff recently.

IE: But if he says he wants to carry on his father's dream—his dream became his own, what was his father's dream? Is it really the exact same type of dream?

LC: I think more broadly, he wanted to be recognised as an American and not have the Chinese part of Chinese American always over his head.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 58.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 63.

KL: But HYH, he's never, he doesn't [appear] as somebody who's ever... He's always at peace with himself it's only when the—

LC: Oh no, I don't think DHH wants that for himself, but I think that after his dad died, he saw that as a consistent and still-present problem, and so he created Marcus. Pretty much for his dad.

IE: How do you think this play applies to Hong Kong then? A lot of you are saying it's an American play, it's got American concepts and the American Dream, so then how would it transfer to somewhere like here? Is it even valid here in Hong Kong?

RB: I think it's very much so, and I'm speaking from a perspective of someone who is not at all Asian American. I didn't grow up and wasn't educated in the States, and I have nothing in me to claim that I am part American. Again, being a Filipino in Hong Kong, fighting for that place, you know, fighting for an image that is more than a domestic helper or a prostitute. How do you do that? Especially, how will I be able to do that without the voice of DHH? Without being a writer, without the words to combat racism? I haven't found the answer but—

SA: Well it's similar [for me]. When I was at university, and you meet someone, or there's a tourist that comes to Hong Kong, they're like, "Oh, where are you from?" "I'm from Hong Kong." "But you're not Chinese." "Yeah, but..." And they ask, "So where are you really from? Where are your family from?" "Well, I've lived in Hong Kong for twenty five years, so it's my home, but I'm from Bangladesh, I've lived there for a year." I still do feel like I am from Bangladesh, I don't forget that side, and I do say I'm from Bangladesh and living in Hong Kong. The funny thing is, actually growing up in Hong Kong, the whole [time] I was just Asian. I was never South Asian. We weren't East Asian, South Asian, West Asian, whatever. It was actually once I got to university in New York, and then suddenly—even the Latino community is like, Dominican or Puerto Rican—they still differentiate themselves in the groups. It's like, oh. So now I find myself saying that I'm South Asian, but for eighteen years before I went to university, I never ever said, "I'm South Asian." I said, "I'm Asian," 'cause Bangladesh is in Asia, China is in Asia... it's Asian.

RB: But this does not only happen in the States... does it not happen in the U.K.?

SA: I think they also, yeah... It's a bit more cliquey, I guess, people do stick more to their own groups. I don't know why that is? Everyone wants to be one community but it's still pretty segregated. In the States, it's very apparent. Yes, they are all American, the Indians are like, "Yes I'm American." Koreans are like, "I am American, but oh no, I'm Korean." "I'm this." Even, "I'm Dominican. I'm Puerto Rican!" That's what I found in the States, because the Latinos there, there's rivalry within them. "They're Puerto Rican, that's why they're like that!" Obviously you shouldn't throw away your identity—where you're from, of course not—but shouldn't you differentiate from... cause arguments and stuff.

AW: One of the greatest things about the play is, yes, it is extraordinarily American, 'cause it is placed one hundred percent within the American context. The details and people, the historical events and everything they talk about are American history. So you can't avoid that. Just like [how] Shakespearean plays are plays within the Elizabethan time period, that's all that the American context is in this play. The overarching themes are still much greater and so universal. Everybody wants to fit in at some point in life. Nobody wants to be alone. Everybody wants to be accepted by a group, whether it be your drama group—'cause the rest of the cool kids in college don't think you're cool—or your rugby team, your football team, math club—I don't know. That's why we have clubs. That's why there are so many club events in school. Everyone wants to be accepted by people. That's the biggest theme in this show, at least from my character's standpoint. The main thing that drives him is that he wants to be accepted by somebody.

SB: I think the flip side of that is that unfortunately most people also want to be able to identify with a group and not... My Hong Kong students this year have been writing research papers about Hong Kong identity and a whole lot of them—I think partly just picking up on the lower end journalism—have been talking about the, “We are Hong Kongers, we're not Chinese.” The sense of wanting to protect your group identity by [exclusion] seems to happen everywhere, the sort of sub-groupings.

IE: If any, how many of you have experienced some sort of random comment—I hesitate to say outright racism—in Hong Kong?

AW: When I first got to Hong Kong—not this trip when I moved here, but when I visited a long time ago, four or five years ago for the first time... I think I told you this last time—no one would give me chopsticks at a table. I'd be hanging out at a restaurant with eight of us, right, and everyone would be Chinese, including me—but they would not know that—and it would be like, *fai tze, fai tze*, chopsticks, chopsticks, chopsticks, fork.¹²⁵ [Everyone laughs] I didn't even know how to ask for it, so I just [unclear] and ate with my fork. That's not racism, it's just—

IE: Well, it's...

[All chime in at once and struggle to define it]

SA: It's something to do with race.

AW: It's more institutional type of situation.

SA: It's not like being negative towards you, it's just that it has to do with the race [you are].

KL: You asked me that question before, and actually, the only thing I could say is when I was sixteen years old, another kid came up to me and said, “You eat dog, don't you?” And

¹²⁵ *Fai tze* means “chopstick” in Cantonese.

I was like, “What?” ‘Cause I actually had not heard about this until he brought it up. It's like, “Koreans eat dog!” “Huh?” He didn't carry it on, he just said it to me that one time and then forgot about it. My drama teacher said, “Hey, I heard that Koreans are the Irish of Asia.” I was like, “What does that even mean?” [Everyone laughs]

SB: Drinking, singing and fighting.

KL: Yeah. As I grew up, I realised the stereotypes and assumptions, but for the most part, it's always been references to what people have heard about or seen, they never discriminated against me purely just for that [reason].

SB: I think having white skin in Hong Kong, you're probably not going to be a victim of racism pretty often. But it is funny/interesting/whatever that many times, Hong Kong Chinese people will say things like, “Well, Westerners, you're not close to your families, you're all individualists, you all believe in sexual promiscuity.” There's no hesitation in saying these things, as though it is the most obvious and hundred percent true generalisation you can make. I have overheard examples of racism but certainly never directed at me though.

IE: [To LC] While we're still talking about white people, what about you? [Everyone laughs]

LC: On the flip side of that, I think that having white skin in Hong Kong makes it a whole lot easier than it should be to get a job teaching English. [Everyone laughs]

SA: Yeah, your English might not be better than—

KL: Even if you're not from the States or from England or from Australia, you could have a Russian accent and still teach.

SA: That's true. And then your kids pick up English in the accent. Like with the Irish, the teacher says “tree” and [the kids] say, “one, two, tree.” [Everyone laughs] It just so happens I have a lot of Scottish friends, and they're like, “Yeah, our kids are picking up our pronunciation, they're saying things, so they're not understood sometimes.”

IE: I am not too sure I agree with you Stephen, because I'm thinking that it's not particularly racism but it's definitely race-centric. For example, don't you always get attacked by people in Wan Chai trying to grab you—

LC: Being attacked by people.

SB: What, by madams?

IE: Yeah, by madams.

RB: Just talk to them. I talk to them in Tagalog.

SB: Yeah, I suppose there could be a... there's definitely an identity of, it's written on your face that you're Western and maybe they're operating with assumptions and therefore you've got the cash or the lack of morals or the whatever it is to buy whatever they're selling, but I think of racism as something that involves a more powerful group making a less powerful group suffer, and I think that a guy who is selling suits on the street, he's not coming from a position of power, so I don't feel undermined. I feel it's irritating, but—

LC: You'd call that generalising.

SA: I guess racism has that negative connotation to it, that they're degrading you and stuff so...

SB: Yeah, power relationships are an element in it. I was going to say too, about relevance in Hong Kong, I know a lot of third culture kids, expat kids, who, when they go to other places, get that “where are you really from” question. Also that sense of displacement, wanting to fit in, not knowing where you fit in, feeling a little bit of a part of more than one culture but not completely any of them, so I've heard a lot of... Kids that've grown up here, whatever their skin colour is, and being talked to and being asked odd questions by people in the States, Australia, wherever.

IE: I was thinking about the Cameron Mackintosh bit, the whole bit with the *Miss Saigon* stuff, people were talking about reverse racism. They were saying that, Jonathan Pryce, why can't he play [The Engineer]? Because the character's Eurasian, so he's saying he's half [of the] Eurasian, does that make sense? He's the Euro half.

SB: Yeah, which totally works if John Lone can play Hamlet and Willy Loman or whatever else he feels like. If you're saying race doesn't matter.

AW: By the way, it completely ignores the fact that for the entire second half of *Miss Saigon* the Engineer is passing himself off as his brother, which, I mean, if you look like Jonathan Pryce, I'm not sure how believable that is.

SB: That's why I say it has more to do with power. For white people to say—

RB: “How dare you.”

SB: Yeah. “My race should never be a barrier to me” and for anyone claiming on Jonathan Pryce's behalf that this is racism against him ignores a lot of pretty important things, like the fact that Asian [actors] can't get jobs playing full-blooded Asians.

AW: Racism has such a deep historical context to everything we do, so there's a strong line in history where people have been repressed. You can't just ignore that history just

because we're in modern day where maybe it's not that obvious at times. [Unclear]
 There's two sides to it, right? Some people are saying it's giving subjugated ethnicities too much of an advantage for something they've never earned but the fact is that the [history] of racism has set up the society in a way that those people are already born into a disadvantage because of their ethnicity. [Unclear]

IE: I'm thinking about the line where he says, "Is race a construct which is still useful."¹²⁶ Do you think so? Or is it a myth?

SB: I'm not sure what "useful" means.

LC: I don't think it's ever going to go away. There's never going to be... We're never going to see the complete and total elimination of racism or ideas about other types of people. For that to disappear, culture would have to disappear as well.

SB: Well, that's why the word useful is—

IE: Loaded?

SB: Not just loaded, but confusing. I don't think the concept ever came about because someone thought, "This will be useful." You say, is it useful or is it mythological, and the answer to either of them might be yes or no. Doesn't mean that the concept is going anywhere or going away.

LC: It seems like two sides of the same coin. You have racism and then you have cultural diversity. It seems like people want to have an identity and they want to belong, but they want that identity to be, say, a little bit more special than, "I belong with everybody." So, "I belong with these people, and outside are these people and these people." That can be shown in a positive way, or it can be shown in a negative way, and that's where I think cultural diversity [has its use], having all these wonderful, different things, ideas, colours, manifestations, being able to stand back and see how wonderful that is and realising that in order for negative ideas about those different places to disappear, you would have to have that disappear as well.

KL: So maybe race is useful to inform ourselves of where we came from, but it shouldn't limit us to what we can do or should do.

IE: What kind of information though?

KL: Well, I'm Korean, my homeland is Korea.

IE: He used finger quotes. [SA laughs]

KL: I used finger quotes because I've lived in Hong Kong since I was four.

¹²⁶ Hwang, *Yellow Face*, 18.

AW: You're Korean playing Chinese.

KL: I'm Korean playing a Chinese. Yes.

IE: You're such a fake. [IE and SA laugh]

KL: That's right. And not even American! The only place I ever stepped foot on was in Hawaii. That's barely—

SA: That's partly Asian, huh? Right? [Laughs]

KL: Yeah. It tells me who I am, where my parents and ancestors are from, gives me a cultural heritage that I look back [at] and I [think], “Great!” It's great, it's there but it doesn't stop me from... It's not erased, I'm not going to erase my past. I know about my country's history more so than I do [about] other countries, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to study Shakespeare. I grew up loving English and American literature and that's where I headed. Zoe, a friend of mine, was born here [in Hong Kong], is local Chinese, went to a local school and when she was at university she wanted to study Yiddish. She did not have a Jewish friend growing up, she just [wanted to study it]. That's what she did her thesis on. Race is always going to be there as a factor, but that, again, if you're talking about race as, “Oh, you're this person so you can't... Oh, you're African American, you must be great at basketball and you must suck at ice hockey.” Right? No. It's limiting.

IE: Do you think it's less limiting in Hong Kong?

SA: No.

AW: I don't think so. I think it's every bit as hard in society here as it is in the States. [Unclear] In Los Angeles, the Latino population is treated and represented in a similar way as the Filipino population is over here in Hong Kong. Just from what I've found... hearing locals talk about that ethnicity reminds me of how caucasians and even Asians in L.A. talk about Latinos. Or Mexicans. They're different races that fill different roles. [Unclear]

SA: I think people don't talk as much about race here, but the actions are still there, [in] what people do. Say in the entertainment industry—casting. There's hardly going to be anything for any brown skin. Actors, actresses, models, whatever. You're not going to find any of them on any of the big billboards. It was Asian and caucasians before, now it's the Eurasians—that's the big market. African Americans, there's hardly anything for them either. It's still there. It's funny, when I was younger, I didn't really see it much in Hong Kong, 'cause like I said when I grew up I was just Asian, and there was American, English and all those other [races], but again it wasn't in the conversation, but racism was still apparent. Like what you [asked], what we faced in Hong Kong. I personally haven't

[experienced racism] but Indians, whenever people would go to stores, they would be monitored more. Even now, the shopkeepers might assume that they're just here to browse, they're not gonna buy anything. So [they say], "No no no no no, just go." Stuff like that. That was actually more apparent back then, but now I see the whole jobs casting stuff.

KL: I think that's why in this play DHH puts a lot of emphasis on being a writer and talks about going on network television and writing. All of that's there, so you need someone like DHH to actually be out there and create things where you see Asian American characters or just Asian characters, full stop. *The Margaret Cho Show*—that's often referred to comically because that failed and was over-the-top Asian, but at least there was an attempt to do that. He's very aware of his responsibility as a writer to generate that sort of content and characters for people to see and get.

IE: I was thinking about what Stephen said earlier, which was about your local students and the low journalism thing. Hong Kong people are kind of anti-mainland. Certain types of mainland [Chinese people]. But we're all Chinese, right? Well, the Hong Kong locals and the mainlanders are all Chinese. If that's not racism, then is that a different kind of—

SB: Yeah, I've wondered what the right label is for all of this. To me it seems more like class-ism. New England Americans talking about hicks in the deep south, or people in the south of England talking about common Northerners, or the Welsh, or the Irish... or the Scots! [Everyone laughs]

KL: Basically everybody else!

SB: Not to generalise about people from the south of the U.K. It doesn't seem like racism quite works as a name for that. I know that for years now, The University of Hong Kong has been doing a poll on whether people identify themselves primarily as Hong Kong Chinese, Chinese Hong Kongers, Hong Kongers, other. That seems to change depending on circumstances and it's probably a bandwagon effect as well, when everyone else decides to be pro-Beijing or pro-Chinese then it starts to get its own momentum going and vice versa. When I started working here and things like Falun Gong would come up in the conversation, and I was trying to get the debate going between my students and most of them would say, "Well, if the government in Beijing says it's wrong, it's wrong. It must be. We're Chinese and we have to support the government's position on it."¹²⁷ The same thing [happened] around the [time of the] Olympics—it became a, "We're all Chinese" and then this year especially it seems, "Oh no, we're very different."¹²⁸

SA: It's suddenly blown up.

SB: Mmm. And I must say, the students I teach by definition are not going to be the most

¹²⁷ Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, is a Chinese spiritual practice that has been banned in China since 1999.

¹²⁸ The 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing saw a popular surge in Chinese patriotism in Hong Kong.

subtle thinkers out there, they're not the brightest and best of all university students. They scraped their way in. I don't know how much of what they say reflects [the general public].

SA: That mentality has suddenly blown up since it's become, quote unquote, easier for mainlanders to come and visit Hong Kong, 'cause it was harder for them to come [before the 1997 handover] and they weren't as easily allowed.¹²⁹ Ever since they started coming then [they caused] whatever property market [problems] and maybe it's just heated sentiments, messing up Hong Kong.¹³⁰

KW: It's so ironic that—referring to what Stephen was saying—it's more of a class hierarchy according to the financial status [of people] in Hong Kong. I was born in China and I lived in Guangzhou. In 1995, I came with my dad [to Hong Kong] to visit my uncle, because he works here. My dad told me, “Do not speak Mandarin!” I grew up speaking Mandarin. He said that because otherwise the taxi driver [would] take us the longer route/way and make us pay more [for the trip]. 'Cause I speak to my dad in Mandarin, there was no way I could speak only Cantonese all the way, while we were in the taxi. So I spoke Mandarin and somehow the taxi driver really took us on a long trip. My dad was like, “See? I told you not to speak!” He didn't blame me or anything, but he said I told you [so]. Okay, so that was 1995. And then in 2007, I came back—after I studied in the States—to Hong Kong. People would ask me, “So where are you from, Kathy?” They

¹²⁹ Prior to the introduction of the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) in 2003, which allowed mainland Chinese tourists to visit Hong Kong on an individual basis, Chinese tourists could only come to Hong Kong on business visa and/or in group tours. Since the IVS came into effect, tourists from mainland China have greatly increased in number. In 2013, they accounted for 67.4 percent of total tourists, or 27.5 million visitors. Please refer to http://www.tourism.gov.hk/english/statistics/statistics_perform.html for more information.

¹³⁰ Many complex factors have led to the tensions between Hong Kong people and mainland Chinese. This topic cannot be easily summarised, nor should they be allocated the space of just a footnote. It is necessary, however, to mention briefly a few of the main factors that have contributed to the tensions in the most neutral way possible. Niche tourism, immigration and property investment contribute to a complex situation. Wealthy mainland Chinese buy rental properties in Hong Kong as a form of investment, contributing to artificially inflated real estate prices and a lack of housing supply. Between 2001 and 2013, there was an increase in birth tourism, where mainland Chinese mothers would come down to Hong Kong to give birth to their child, thus ensuring their permanent residency and all consequent access to social welfare. There is a busy grey-goods market between Hong Kong and China, where a wide variety of products, from baby milk powder to the newest technological gadgets, are bought in Hong Kong and taken across the border to be re-sold, sometimes depleting the stock available for Hong Kong residents. Immigrants who move to Hong Kong, and tourists on a visit, are often looked down upon because of their different social and cultural behaviour, which may include etiquette in public domains, such as queuing and the use of restroom facilities. I must stress, however, that stereotype features strongly in the perception of all involved, even if that stereotype is sometimes reinforced by actual events. There is a huge cultural difference between Hong Kong locals and mainland Chinese. I should also stress that there are other minority races and groups in Hong Kong, whose relationship with the majority is also sensitive and tenuous. The factors I mention above are not the only elements contributing to the sometime volatile relationship between the people of Hong Kong and China. It is a highly complicated and sensitive situation which any curious reader of this interview should research for themselves, and judge accordingly.

would be like, “You must be an ABC, right?”¹³¹ I said, “No I am not, I actually lived in the States for a very, very long time.” “So where are you really from?” Seriously, that’s what they’d ask. They would be all excited about this whole conversation. “So you’re from overseas, right? Where did you live?” I’d say, “L.A. and New York.” “Wow, that must be really exciting! Why did you come back?” “Oh, I was in the pageant.”¹³² “Oh, okay!” Then they’d be like, “So, where are you really from?” I’d say, “Well, actually I was born in China,” and then the response would be, “Oh.” [In disappointed tone] Seriously, that would be the total response for knowing that I was born in China, that I was not a local [Hong Konger].

SA: This is from the Chinese?

KW: This is from the Chinese! From the local Hong Kong people. They just have the sense that Eurasians are better. Caucasians are superior. Whenever they... Say in Lan Kwai Fong, right?¹³³ Local girls, whatever, expats, they’re dressing up so prettily, so sexily. Their eyes are mostly drawn to the ABCs or the people who are from overseas or non-Asians, because they think they are just better or superior because they... because of their skin colour. I’ve seen that a lot, personally. Of course, from my experience, in the [entertainment] business, it’s easier for me not to tell people where I was really born, because they will be judging you. The local people. However, if I were to hang out with people like you guys, it doesn’t really matter because it’s not where we’re from, it’s who we are as a person. I have to say, as mainlanders, we do feel discriminated against, regardless of whether it’s in Hong Kong or the States. In the States, because we’re Asian, we’re the minorities so we get discriminated against a lot. I remember when I was in high school and going down the stairs, there would be black girls pushing me around—they were so big and they just pushed me around—but I was okay with... I didn’t feel like it was a very strong discrimination, I was like, maybe she was just not being careful.

When I was in the States, I had a boyfriend who was caucasian. It felt as though when I was with him if I were to go out, that people treated me better, as compared to when I would go on my own, alone. Coming back to Hong Kong, I work with expats and also with people who are really from mainland China—probably they came to Hong Kong for an event or something—and the way they treat people is different. That’s the probably one of the reasons why locals despise mainlanders, because some of their habits are just horrible. They spit on the floor, they will pee in the MTR or something like that. That’s pretty disgusting—

LC: That’s really horrible.

KW: Sometimes I feel I’m ashamed to say I’m from the mainland because I don’t do shit like that! But that’s what they do, I can’t help it that they do that, because they’ve been so

¹³¹ ABC is short for American Born Chinese.

¹³² Kathy Wu is the 2007 Miss Asia USA Region winner, and also the winner of Miss Friendship.

¹³³ Lan Kwai Fong is an agglomeration of trendy bars and restaurants in Central, Hong Kong’s central business district, popular with westernised Chinese and expats alike.

poor for the past fifty years and they just got money because of property or stocks, but their inner quality never [changed]. The mentality is still where they are, however they've got this money. They come to Hong Kong, sweeping Hong Kong away with their money buying Louis Vuitton and all the luxury stuff—

RB: The flats.

KW: Exactly. And we have to deal with that because that's part of them. [Sighs] I don't know if I should say that I discriminate against them now, but I actually do not appreciate what they are doing. However, Hong Kong is [made up of] their money.

KL: I thought of an idea for a bestseller. “*Hao* To Be Rich.”

IE: “How To Be Rich?”

KL: Yeah. “*Hao* To Be Rich.”

SA: “Hao” as in H-A-O? “Good To Be Rich.” [Everybody laughs]¹³⁴

AW: [To Kathy] What is it they do?

KW: They spit on the floor. They actually pooped in the sinks at Ocean Park. Seriously! That's true! True story. I'm not making it up.

SA: Ew! They make their kids poop, not themselves, right?

KW: Of course! The mommy—

SA: So they're just getting up on the sink—

AW: Are the park sinks a little low? 'Cause they're high, it's really difficult.

SA: They put their kids up there.

KW: Yeah.

AW: I haven't done that shit.

SA: Yeah.

KL: How are you going to relate all of this to the play? You just want our opinions?

IE: Yeah. I just want to hear what you guys think, really.

¹³⁴ *Hao* is the Putonghua pronunciation for the word “good.”

SA: I was just wondering—I forget why I was wondering this, it was probably something we were talking about before—at the same time, how much interaction is there in Hong Kong between the locals and the expats. Yeah, there isn't. So we're more welcoming but we don't really mingle.

KL: Do you know what would be interesting? I would really love to hear feedback from audience members about this play. What questions would pop up in their mind about race and how it relates. It's going to be a wide variety of audience, right? There's going to be the expat audience, obviously, because there are a lot of references in the expat community, but there's also going to be a whole bunch of students and my colleagues at work, the majority of them are local Chinese teachers.

SB: Yeah, and we don't know how much the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre grapevine is contributing through their own mailing lists.

KL: That would be interesting.

IE: I'm listening to you guys and you're telling me about all these things that have happened to you. So race really is a construct. You have some sort of other identity that does not belong to Hong Kong.

SB: I think there is definitely no question. It's just like the difference between sex and gender. What chromosomes we have is biological, but what it means to be male or female... Yeah, so race, culture they are pretty hard to deny.

AW: They're completely constructs. Biologically, we're the same. We've created this construct because we feel the need to be different from other people. It goes back to what Stephen was saying before, it's not only that we want to be accepted, we want to be accepted and feel like we're different [at the same time]. We want to be uniquely accepted. We created all of this... It's not to say that doesn't serve a purpose but yeah, it's a construct.

SB: What was it? Alan Bloome, way back when in *The Closing of The American Mind*. As far as he could tell, the only thing that was culturally universal was ethnocentricity. This seems to be the one that everybody can agree on. [Unclear]

IE: Originally [for my thesis] I was talking about *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. A lot of you weren't here for that. Did you watch it?

SB: Eric led the protest against that in Hong Kong.

EN: Basically, yeah.

IE: In the show, there is a caucasian playing in yellowface. She walks around talking in this weird, bad Chinese accent. It's part of the plot. She abducts white [adult] female orphans [and sells them] into prostitution. She ships them over to Asia. She's a white

character in yellowface with her eyes taped up and the accent.

AW: That's nuts.

IE: Everybody was fine with it in Hong Kong. They found it really funny, they wanted to go watch it... The two male Chinese characters are emasculated, they're wearing cues, they only speak in Cantonese and sing in Mandarin, so they have surtitles—

SA: Because Chinese people can't speak English. [Laughs] Yeah, we were talking about how in entertainment, when they cast an Indian person, they have to have an Indian accent, and a Filipino will have to be like this, with the attitude, and they'll be [acting out] the jobs that they're perceived to have.¹³⁵

IE: It still really bothers me. I think I was telling you this once? There was a kid's show on in the afternoon on TVB and there's a golliwog in it. There's a Chinese dude with an afro wig and covered in shoe polish.

AW: You still see that in Japan, right?

LC: Yeah, they still have that in Japan. They have it on backpacks and pencil cases and stuff.

EN: By the way, the situation that Iris just described, that's Yellow Peril. Back in the twenties and thirties it was a big thing, that the Chinese were only here to run laundries and after that the white men would send them back to China.

IE: It's terrifying. It's still there, though. DHH talks about China being the enemy of the U.S., you totally see that happening now. Everyone saying that the Chinese ship in cheap goods so we need to have market equality? I hate to point this out to you guys, but you were the guys who wanted to buy in bulk and wanted to do it cheap. You chose to export the production of items to China and exploit [cheap labour]... and now they're saying it's China's fault. It's just kind of... It blows my mind, it really does.

KW: That's what the communists are saying.

SA: Wasn't it the same thing that they said with the Taliban? Well you gave them the ammunition. [unclear]

IE: It's like, you're missing the point!

KL: I saw a recent *30 Rock* episode where Alec Baldwin wanted to promote America,

¹³⁵ A large majority of the Filipino population in Hong Kong are domestic helpers. Cultural perception in Hong Kong stereotypes Filipinos as such, even though many do not work as domestic helpers.

create American jobs, so he gets a company to create American sofas.¹³⁶ He has the prototype, he sits on it, it's very comfortable, it's lovely, it's fantastic, wonderful. But then he actually goes to the store, and he talks about, "Oh, this store has lots of American values to it, this is the store where fireworks were created," blah blah blah blah. He actually sees the real couch and it is the most uncomfortable, badly designed couch ever. He's like, "What the hell is this?" All the guys working there were like, "Well, this is an actual American couch designed by American engineers! We're not clever enough to make a comfortable couch, you gotta buy one in China!" [Everyone laughs] For the rest of the episode, he tries to sell this really uncomfortable couch as really American. It's American.

SA: I have a question, after Stephen [mentioned] the prejudice against Westerners. I don't have an answer to this, but... So Westerners we consider [are] what... caucasians from America or the U.K.? Chinese Americans brought up in America, would they be considered Westerners?

IE: They would be ABCs, BBCs...¹³⁷

SA: So they're not Westerners, why would the others have been born and brought up in America, why are they Westerners... The Latinos aren't considered westerners either.

IE: Westerners here would be [considered] white.

SA: Yeah I know, even though people would have gone through the exact same thing.

IE: Yeah it's weird. It's definitely worth thinking about. I think we're done. Thank you.

¹³⁶ 30 Rock. "Murphy Brown Lied To Us." Episode 121, first broadcast April 19, 2012 by NBC. directed by John Riggi, written by Robert Carlock and Vali Chandrasekaran.

¹³⁷ BBC stands for British Born Chinese.

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